Rōnin and the Nameless

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/8766247.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Overwatch (Video Game)
Relationships:	Jesse McCree/Hanzo Shimada, Cole Cassidy/Hanzo Shimada
Characters:	Hanzo Shimada, Genji Shimada, Jesse McCree, Hana "D.Va" Song, Mei-Ling Zhou, Fareeha "Pharah" Amari, Winston (Overwatch), Lena "Tracer" Oxton, Angela "Mercy" Ziegler, Lúcio Correia dos Santos, Reinhardt Wilhelm, Torbjörn Lindholm, Satya "Symmetra" Vaswani, Widowmaker | Amélie Lacroix, Sombra (Overwatch), Cole Cassidy (Overwatch)
Additional Tags:	how they got together, Eventual Happy Ending, Sibling Rivalry, Angst, Comedy, Implied Reaper76, POV Hanzo Shimada, POV Jesse McCree, Unreliable Narrator, My First Work in This Fandom, Biracial Jesse McCree, Post-Recall, Fluff, Omnic Rights, Post-Crisis Issues, Conspiracy, Slow Burn, Plot Twist, Cyberpunk, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Hurt/Comfort, Versatile McHanzo, did I mention slow burn, everyone's in this, Genji Shimada is a Little Shit, One Big Damn Redemption Arc, slight canon divergent, World Travel, "Every villain is the hero of their own story", Eventual Smut, Eventual Romance, Dreams and Nightmares, brief moments of original characters, Mutual Pining, cw: discussion of suicidal ideation, Biracial Cole Cassidy (Overwatch), Drug Abuse, Mention of Past Drug Abuse
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2016-12-06 Completed: 2018-07-17 Words: 150,117 Chapters: 11/11

Rōnin and the Nameless

by motorghost

Summary

The Recall was in spring. Cole Cassidy and the others trickle in over the summer. Shimada Hanzo arrives in the fall. By winter, the real work will begin.

A story about two old killers trying to change their ways in a world ready for war.

Notes

This is a how-they-got-together fic, a Hanzo/Cole character study and an exploration of how things might transpire post-Recall. It's inspired by zen philosophy, cyberpunk, sci-fi tech, USA/Japanese mythology and folklore, and Western/samurai films. It will go back and forth between Hanzo and Cole's POV. It will be slightly canon-divergent (written before the Ashe cinematic).

WARNING: This is a more gritty and realistic depiction of the OW world as a whole. Both men are not quite the criminals they once were, but the change is still ongoing. There will be ample use of the Unreliable Narrator. There will be bad choices made that will have real consequences. There will be issues around crime, omnic/civil rights, body modification, drug abuse, poverty, post-war-profiteering and war in general.

ALSO... This fic is incomplete AS PER the original concept I had for it. The story simply got too long and too complicated for it to be feasible in finishing within the parameters of my daily life (classic 'first fic' mistake!) So it may end in a place that feels like there is more story to tell. While I am deeply apologetic for not bringing the entire tale to its original (perhaps more satisfying) conclusion, I do feel that I ended it on a hopeful note, and one with SOME resolution between Hanzo and Cole. I hope it is enough that you will still consider reading and enjoying!

Comments are always encouraged and deeply appreciated. Trust that, in 2024, I'm still over-joyed to see them in my inbox and respond to them. <3

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Hanzo arrives at Gibraltar and takes stock of what he finds.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: suicidal thoughts, alcoholism, and blatant flirting

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hanzo knows that Genji picked the cineplex for their weekly hang-out so that they wouldn't have to talk to each other, but that's fine. As long as Genji's with him, he's not getting into trouble, and that's all Hanzo cares about.

The theater has been emptied. There's a cooler full of beer waiting by their seats. The only trailers shown are for the double-feature they're about to watch: a Wild West special, classics of American folklore, displayed with blazing gunfire and a lot of exclamation points. Hanzo cracks open a beer before the first title rolls; if he has to endure Genji's terrible taste in film, he's going to be drunk.

His expectations are met. The first picture, in which two haphazard outlaws rob banks in Bolivia, is in turns both dull and overly glib. Hanzo looks at Genji twice throughout: once when the younger man laughs and again when he cries out in shock and gestures wildly with his beer can. Hanzo leans away right before he opens it and sprays all over them both.

He's snoring on Hanzo's shoulder by the time the second film starts. The eldest considers waking him. Surely one bad flick is enough to satisfy his fraternal duty. It's not like he's flush with free time. He's already spent half the film's runtime exchanging texts. But during the opening credits of whistling guitars and beating hooves, he brushes Genji's green bangs out of his finally-peaceful face and decides to let his little brother sleep. He's probably still hungover from the night before.

And the second movie turns out to be much better: a lone gunman pitting two vicious gangs against each other. It's slow, brutal. Artfully composed. Hanzo's focus narrows around the nameless cowboy. He appreciates his zen-like stoicism and wry humor. He smiles at the way he speaks around the cigar between his teeth, how his dusty poncho sweeps over his broad shoulders, how his squinting eyes seem to understand that he does not live in a fairytale. Hanzo can appreciate a story where the characters know that heroes aren't real.

There's also something familiar about the film, but Hanzo can't place it. He doesn't strain to try; opportunities to relax are few.

Only when he and Genji are back in their town car does he realize that the plot was exactly the same as an ancient Japanese film in which a gang war between two rival clans is orchestrated by one clever rōnin: *an ex-samurai. A wandering warrior that knows neither duty nor purpose.*

Hanzo rubs the center of his chest and looks across the car at Genji.

No worse fate imaginable.

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Hanzo doesn't even think the word "cowboy" again until his first day at Watchpoint: Gibraltar, nearly fifteen years later. He arrives late in the morning, full of jet lag and misgivings, but Genji seems glad to greet him. He sparkles with an excitement buried under a formal politeness as familiar as it is disturbing. As they walk from the launch pad to the western dormitories, Hanzo examines Genji's new form: the gleaming silver plates, the glowing green slots that periodically let out puffs of what looks like steam, the self-aggrandizing kanji for *"bushin"* emblazoned on his chest piece. It's hard to accept, but that detail above all others confirms to Hanzo that it really is his ridiculous little brother under all that metal.

The confirmation brings him no comfort. The late-summer sun gleaming off that familiar sword jutting from Genji's back is like something out of a nightmare, the demon of his truest shame. Everything he sees, everything Genji says, he accepts with the false equanimity of a man expecting to wake up. Perhaps even hoping to.

His brother's dorm is small, thoroughly unimpressive, yet full of personal effects. Some are new, like the blanket of Nepalese design, stitched so fine it could only have been made by omnic hands. Some are old, more akin to Hanzo's own sensibilities: a large *futon* with a white comforter (unmade), a *chabudai* with cushion seats (littered with dirty ration packs), and an alcove in the corner with two *bonsai* and one scroll (formerly a coat closet).

Those items couldn't have come from anywhere but the Shimada estate. That Genji might have been visiting his old rooms while Hanzo was not two hundred yards away, praying in the shrine for Genji's supposedly passed-on spirit... it puts a knot in Hanzo's brow that he doesn't bother to hide.

And he knows, of course, that this is the same room where Genji laid down after countless battles with the Shimada-gumi, where he put away his sword after it took the lives of their kin. Where he struggled with his new mechanical body—the same struggle that rises in Hanzo's chest every time he looks Genji's way. He's already noted the lack of mirrors.

The younger brother is comparatively upbeat as he escorts Hanzo to his new dorm, which is also dour in comparison: a cot, glaring fluorescent lights, a dresser. All of it industrial, military-grade plastic. Genji mentions that only officers were given private dorms and describes the person who bunked there before, but the eldest isn't listening. He's looking out the window at one of the overgrown lawns, a row of outdated all-terrain vehicles haphazardly parked just shy of the cliff. Remnants of a hasty evacuation. *Whatever battle took place here lingers still*, he thinks.

Hanzo isn't surprised when Genji branches off into discussing the merits of Overwatch itself and all that the organization has given him. All that they could do to aid the tumultuous world, their renovation of the base. He updates him on their ongoing conflict with the terrorist organization known as Talon and steps they've taken to deter their operations. His ramblings come just short of a sales pitch, but Hanzo knows that Genji knows that his elder brother is no fool; Genji will not ask him to join them until he's built an airtight case. Like their old sparring matches, the blows will come from all sides, indirectly. And neither will give an inch.

Or, more likely, he will never outright ask, but will expect Hanzo to choose. Like that maddening ultimatum Genji lobbed at him after emerging, ghost-like, in their family shrine all those months ago: *it is time to pick a side.*

A fine time to play nobility, after appearing as an assassin. Resting his blade at His elder brother's throat. Though, Hanzo supposes, he was the one who attacked first. Again.

Then Genji slyly admits that Overwatch is preparing for an important mission. That meeting everyone in their element is the best way to understand. It is far past the time for solitude—and a drink—but to refuse would only delay the inevitable.

They walk side-by-side down the black tarmac, Hanzo's chin already raised in expectation of veiled animosity; "celebrity heroes" trying to re-start a failed peacekeeping operation on a decimated base, poseurs that will once again dominate his younger brother's mind and turn him further from the path he was meant to walk. Delusional fools who only know of Hanzo from the worst mistake of his life.

But the youngest Shimada is ever lighter—bird-like. His chromed faceplate sparkles happily in the Mediterranean sun, a stark contrast to the heavy, starched blues and blacks of his elder. He tells Hanzo: *I'm happy you're here*. Hanzo tries to return the sentiment, but fails to convince. He has too much behind him to feign hope in what lay ahead.

Just before they step into the main lab, he detects what sounds like someone whistling. Turning his head, he looks for the source, but the wind only picks up from a pleasant breeze to an oceanic gust.

Winston is in his lab, a two-storied, make-shift command center, exemplary save for the tire swing and strewn tubs of peanut butter. Though he knew what Winston was before seeing him in person, Hanzo is still startled to see a massive gorilla delicately soldering minute robotic parts with the delicacy of a master. Even more startling is the idea that there may be others just like him: genetic leftovers from a botched experiment on the moon, scattered to God-knows-where. Overwatch truly was a haven for any and all kinds of societal leftovers.

At least he is polite. Hanzo watches with interest as Winston shows the two Shimada his latest project: improved security bots he calls OWLS: omnicopter watch-link sentries. Little drones sub-routed via Athena: their AI system with whom Winston seems unnaturally close. The soft-spoken software notes that these units are capable of incapacitating any attacker within a hundred yards as the drones' white eyes turn red and electrodes slingshot towards a dummy omnic at impossible speeds, immediately shocking it to the floor. Winston seems pleased, and adds that, with a little more work, they should be capable of mobilizing dozens of these bots within seconds of Athena registering an attack.

Hanzo is impressed, and says as much. He adds that, at the very least, he can rest assured that they are keeping his little brother safe. Genji lets out an auto-tuned sigh; Winston doesn't seem to know how to respond.

In the medical bay, Dr. Angela Ziegler is arranging for a shipment of supplies. Genji immediately straightens around her, becomes the affected 'White Knight' as Hanzo

witheringly assesses from behind his shoulder. The doctor is tall, shapely, blonde—just Genji's type. She is also frosted with intelligence and her long fingers move with efficient precision about her tasks like she was born to it—just the type to avoid someone like Genji.

Yet her smile is warm when it falls on his shining faceplate. They talk like old friends who share a deep, mutual respect, and Hanzo has to once again confront the notion that he truly doesn't know the man his little brother has become. Years' worth of events pass through their eyes as Angela asks Genji about his life with the Shambali, how his health is, how he is feeling. By the time Genji introduces her to Hanzo, he can only stiffly nod.

Her demeanor shifts instantaneously. Chiy at best; polite, yet all the more abrasive in contrast to the warmth she showed Genji. The conversation becomes so tense so quickly that Genji pardons them after only a couple minutes, chastising Hanzo on the way out for his historical stubbornness: his lack of flexibility, the condescension. He brings up 'the karaoke incident.′

Hanzo endures without comeback. His brother has more than a few free shots lined up.

Fareeha Amari and Torbjorn Lindholm are working out the logistics of air support in the comm tower, which Lindholm has filled with holographic intel schematics from both Overwatch and Helix International, the private security force. Helix's premier Captain Amari has a sharp and imposing mind to go with her tall form, and Hanzo likes her immediately: responsible, eager to prove herself, a practical ruthlessness behind a soldier's good humor. She does not respond to him half as amicably; after a terse nod, she arches a broad shoulder in his direction and doesn't look at him again for the remainder of their visit.

If anything, it makes Hanzo respect her all the more. At least someone is honest in their dislike.

Yet the utterly unaffected Lindholm, sparking with genius yet built like a laborer, hastily shakes Hanzo’s hand before returning to the task at hand. Next to Amari, he looks beyond diminutive, but he barks out strategies and engineering solutions with decades' worth of crass authority. Hanzo knows his work; the whole world does. If it weren't for the weapons development of Torbjorn Lindholm, the Omnic Crisis may never have been quite so devastating.

His plans intrigue Hanzo immensely, such that Genji has to gently nudge him before he gets too involved and inevitably takes over. Amari punches the door panel so that it locks behind them.

Mei-Ling Zhou is training with Lena Oxton in one of the simulation bays. The cavernous room is frozen over so badly that Hanzo shivers upon entering. Mei apologizes for the cold, returns his bow and speaks to him in heavily accented Japanese. His returned courtesies seem to make her shy, but she returns his good manners, helpfully explaining the center's climate-control feature and additional combat training facilities with a genius that humility cannot hide.

Her presence is upbeat, but Genji already told him of her departed team at the old Ecopoint in Antarctica. Frozen in their own cryo chambers, forgotten by the world until Mei woke up alone in the dark. Every cheerful word seems like a veil above permanent sadness.

Oxton, the lanky and brash British pilot, appears out of nowhere and laughingly tells him he looks just like his photos. The chronal accelerator that keeps her from blinking out of time catches his eye, and he's about to ask her about it when Hana Song, teenage MEKA wunderkind, appears from behind with coffee and bluntly tells Hanzo that he looks *nothing* like his photos. "Do your sideburns do that naturally?"

All three of them welcome him to the team, tell him that this as well as all other training facilities are at his disposal, and run through the daily itinerary with him—breakfast, simulations, strategy meetings—all while implying that he is under no obligation to join in any activity whatsoever, and glancing at Genji throughout. More than happy to avoid contact with people with whom he has no need to associate, Hanzo keeps his responses short. Let them assume what they will.

Then they ask Hanzo what Genji was like as a kid, and before Genji can object, Hanzo crosses his arms and calmly throws his younger brother under public transportation: the games, the parties, the indiscreet liaisons. The karaoke incident.

The women are delighted. So much for letting Genji get even.

As if he ever could, Hanzo reminds himself.

They meet Zenyatta on the launch pad when the sky is close to setting. A peach-gold aura surrounds the omnic monk, cross-legged and hovering three feet above the ground. Gleaming orbs float around his meditating form like an orbit of lazy planets. Half of them emit light the likes of which Hanzo has never seen—bottled, miniature suns. The other half bleed a black viscosity so dark that it seems to absorb all other light in their vicinity, as if they were holes in creation itself.

Hanzo stares as they occasionally turn translucent against the power of their innards, but each returns to a simple steel orb as soon as the brothers come close. A trick of the Mediterranean sun, no doubt.

The omnic is too vague and lofty for his liking; even more alien than the rest of his kind. Hanzo could sense the improper reverence in Genji's voice when he spoke of Zenyatta

before, and finds he is unwilling to adjust his own irate glare. But it's only reflected back to him off of the monk's unmoving yet irritatingly sympathetic face plate, and Genji hardly pauses to introduce his elder brother before launching into a topic to which only he and Zenyatta are privy. It's as if they've entered their own little world, one that is at least three feet above the ground. Far above Hanzo and all he represents.

He sighs hot air through his nostrils like a weary dragon. The difficult steps that brought him all the way from that springtime meeting in Hanamura to this desolate rock in early autumn is catching up with him. And the launch pad radiates heat, growing warmer by the second; even in his light *kyūdō-gi,* he feels himself baking alive. He shucks the sleeve off of his left arm to at least let the breeze touch the dragon tattooed from pectoral to wrist.

For ten years, he has had nothing to think on but exile. He wants to be alone to digest the day and collect his thoughts. To figure out what he will do next.

But just when he decides to cut the tour short, he hears that whistle again—a whistle, and heavy footsteps accompanied by a metallic clicking sound.

Hanzo turns his head towards the hangar door and sees a giant of a man with a gray beard and a scarred eye, laughing raucously alongside a shorter man, who looks like—

Hanzo squints.

It’s a *cowboy*. The shorter man is definitely wearing a cowboy hat, boots, spurs, chaps, a six-shooter and a red cloak—a piece of clothing that takes Hanzo right back to his childhood, makes him wonder if he isn't actually dreaming after all. Or if he didn’t just step out of time.

Things do seem to be slowing down.

The laughing cowboy looks ahead, meets Hanzo's eyes, and drops his grin. He pushes up the brim of his hat, revealing his face: a wide mouth set in a wide jaw, heavy brows over brown eyes, a glowing cigar hooked under a prominent canine tooth. A cynical gaze caught in a permanent squint, as if he grew up in too-bright places. Wild hair and an even wilder beard surround a weathered yet glinting face; sharp, like his clicking spurs, and another vibrant quality that Hanzo nearly whispers out loud: *open*. Heart on his sleeve; an easy target.

The man’s grin slowly spreads until it’s like looking at the sun, making Hanzo avert his gaze.

Then he glances back, then away again. When he looks back a third time, the cowboy is *still* staring. The larger man is distracted, monologuing while his companion slowly, brazenly looks Hanzo up and down. The knot in his tawny throat bobs up and down, swallowing. He takes the cigar out of his mouth, forms his lips in a pursed ‘O.' He exhales a stretched-out sound that Hanzo barely catches: *hoo-ee*.

Hanzo crosses his arms and rolls back his shoulders, arching his already impeccable posture, and the man’s bow-legged gait nearly stutters on the concrete.

It’s such a display that Hanzo almost gets Genji's attention so that he can bear witness, then reconsiders—that might stop it from happening.

The cowboy is now quite near. Hanzo can smell tobacco, something redolent of bourbon and vanillin. He can make out the eyes of the skull carved into the man's left arm: a shoddy, gunmetal-gray prosthetic. He can see the massive six-shooter in its worn holster. His eyes keep traveling down until they narrow on a ridiculous belt buckle, large and golden, bearing the letters BAMF. He immediately regrets the action; the second he looks up, the cowboy's grin is even wider, stretched like a fox's jaws, ear to big ear. He can hear the breathy little *"damn"* as those eyes cascade over Hanzo's bare left arm.

As he passes, the cowboy tips his hat, low voice vibrating, *"Howdy, darlin',"* and Hanzo notices how one eye is much more dilated than the other.

They pass with inches to spare. The big man waves amiably as they keep walking, but the cowboy turns, walks half-backwards, hat off and pressed to his chest like he can't tear his eyes away. He's still staring and grinning as the big man chuckles: *"Mein Gott*, Cole! You are like the teenager."

Hanzo turns back to Genji, whose head is tilted at an angle that Hanzo, despite his little brother's new face, immediately identifies as 'coy.'

"The big one's Wilhelm Reinhardt, our resident Crusader. And that's, ah, Cole Cassidy," Genji says, hands knit innocently behind his back. "He's... American."

Hanzo glares. His brother is trying not to laugh while Zenyatta's blank gaze amplifies whatever embarrassment Hanzo hasn't managed to suppress. He looks away, then towards the edge of the platform, half-expecting the cowboy to be lingering at the corner. But he's gone.

The sun bleeds into the horizon, the world gradually turns from orange to indigo, and Genji walks Hanzo back to his dorm. They share a meal and then jasmine tea, but the gulf is too wide to cover in a day. Genji winds up excusing himself after one cup, issuing a quiet good night and seeing himself out. The second the automatic door snips shut, Hanzo goes to the bottom of his duffel for the saké bottle.

He sits against the window's open frame with one leg hanging off the edge and examines the silent base three stories below. A lot of patchy grass and small flowers, a few palm trees reaching over the cliff. Open lanes of pale concrete and black tarmac between military buildings and shuttle-launch facilities. Wind-blasted glass shields the few fluorescent lights within. A communications tower flashes a beacon at its zenith, mimicking the more traditional lighthouse on a rocky islet just off the coast.

Hanzo's feels like he's in a nest within a nest: lofty, secure. Trapped.

His gaze grows soft as he pulls the sea air to the bottom of his lungs. He attempts to calm his mind. A mere witness to his body and its surroundings: the moon, the dark, the wind-rustled

grass. Gazing at his thoughts like passing clouds in an otherwise flawless sky. Like the crashing waves that are his life's new song.

The bottle is waiting for him when he gives up. It twists open neat and goes down smooth; a much more reliable source of respite in these unreliable times.

And there's little other comfort to be found. The base is all salt and steel; even his dorm is stale with mildew and something unpleasantly clinical, like industrial cleaner. Not that he's enjoyed much better for the past several years. His wanderings led him into chaotic conditions often enough. Even before that, in Hanamura, when he was raised as the crown prince of a castle built on blood, exposed to the finest luxuries whilst simultaneously trained to withstand—even relish—the ascetic and the painful. Always preparing for the day when he would inherit both the throne and the proverbial sword that hovers above it.

But the austerity of a dojo is a far cry from the bleakness of a military base; the warmth of wood versus the dead weight of concrete. Like his brother's face below that mask of—

He drinks. *This is a place for soldiers*. Genji, try as he might to pretend otherwise, is *shinobi:* trained and loved and forged through fire. Now he acts like just another appropriated piece of hardware, reassembled and used by an organization that never taught him. Never loved him —

The bottle isn't as large as he's used to, but he's still surprised when he finds it all gone. It's funny how often that happens. He'll be enjoying a high-quality brew, lost in his thoughts, then be shocked when he realizes he's got nothing left. For someone so attuned to his every action, so obsessed with perfection, it's remarkable that he can become so blind to so much.

But isn't that how you wound up killing Genji in the first place?

With a weary growl, Hanzo forsakes all poise and slumps against the frame. His leg swings, the metallic dragon-toes of his leg enhancements tapping the wall below. He stares down, down, at individual blades of grass. Then wider, at the wind's gentle pattern-making. The ripples of soothing moonlight.

His gaze goes slack, but his heart beats faster. He looks straight down from the window's ledge and plots the trajectory.

Not high enough. Perhaps some other time.

Then one of the doors opens on the rocky face of the main base with a shuddering drone, and someone walks out.

Hanzo retracts his leg and leans back into shadow, squinting like an owl in its tree. But even three stories up, he knows immediately who is approaching.

Those spurs are so loud. *He doesn't wear them into battle, does he?*

Cole Cassidy swaggers across the lawn, glancing up and down the platform. Hanzo can see yet another cigar burning and fading rapidly, an anxious on-and-off—like a firefly in winter

when all the other fireflies have gone. He can smell that very specific tobacco: cheap, over-toasted, yet Hanzo has smoked enough cigars to find the smell appealing—even intoxicating, given enough exposure. He doesn't anticipate that happening.

Though apparently the cowboy does. He stops within range of Hanzo's window and looks up.

Hanzo almost laughs. *Is he really going to—*

"Hey! Han-zo!"

The notion of ignoring Cassidy occurs only as a way of passing the time while he lets the cowboy squirm. There's no way he's not going to see how this unfolds, and that wide grin is so eager. So *open*.

A good vantage point, an easy target.

Hanzo watches Cassidy shuffle in his boots and call out two more times before he leans out from the shadows. Unhurried; looking down the proud shaft of his nose.

"I could hear you coming from a mile away."

Cassidy's smile has enough wattage to be seen from space, let alone Hanzo's window. Despite his constantly frowning eyes and rough looks, the cowboy's charm slides through on a smooth baritone, aided and abetted by what Hanzo would call a highly American politesse; a discordant arrangement that somehow manages to appeal all the same.

"Well, you do got the high ground, darlin'."

Hanzo's voice is remarkably coarse next to Cassidy's smooth drawl, even though the cowboy looks like he was born with a cigarette in his mouth and Hanzo only rarely smokes. "What do you want?"

"I'dunno," Cassidy hums, with a tone that suggests he knows exactly, "Thought I'd ask you on a stroll. I know Genji showed y'around, but..." that grin grows wolfish, "Genji don't know all the good spots."

Hanzo lets his leg slip off the window-sill again, his exposed left side hitting the moonlight. "The good spots."

"Yeah." Cassidy glances around the base—a nonchalant attempt at checking the darkness for eavesdroppers. "Some pretty, some interesting... some real private-like."

Hanzo narrows his eyes. His shoulders roll back, preening. His voice lowers, almost a growl. "Private-like?"

The grave is dug; Cassidy hops in. "Yeah. Real secluded. Lonesome, even. Thought maybe we'd walk on out to the cliffs and I'd show you some of *my* tattoos." His brows go up and down with ridiculous, practiced precision.

The breeze is silent. Hanzo tilts his head, then nods it side to side as he turns towards his own room. Then he looks down at the utter lack of saké in his lap.

A flick of his wrist, and the bottle sails through the air. Cassidy jumps as it shatters by his feet, little shards of blue glass flying outward like so many dragon teeth.

“Jesus Christ!”

The window shuts, the latch is drawn, and Hanzo crawls into bed.

It's a long time before he actually falls asleep. Thousands of years echo through his body for hours, delaying the release of unconsciousness. Booming gunfire in empty theaters and pounding hooves across the plains. Wind through the grass and massive serpents rising from waves on a distant beach. Spurs on concrete: too loud, too sharp, too close by.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thewinterking for beta'ing and being an overall great pal!

I hope you guys enjoyed the first chapter!!! Next up: Jesse sinks into his life at the rock and new-Overwatch while flirting with a murderous yakuza boss.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Cole prepares for new-Overwatch's first mission and circles the new guy.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: alcoholism, mentions of past violence, and drunk old men.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

0018 Days Until Launch

Clouds of dust swim between shafts of early-morning light. The floor still shows rat tracks and all that occupy the barren shelves are an empty flower pot and one steel mug. This room hasn't seen an occupant in years, but Cole Cassidy is used to sleeping in places he doesn't call home. The air was stale when he first dropped his duffel. Now it smells like cigar smoke and leather. All dust settles eventually.

With a long grunt, he rises and puts his aching feet on the cold floor. It’s 0600 and there’s no outstanding tasks on the docket, but he's never been one to sleep past the sun. Places to go, things to do. A burning desire to chase the horizon—at his own pace.

He figures that just about every man does the same thing in the morning: scratches himself, clears his sinuses, passes gas, stumbles somewhere to piss, looks around for clean pants and a shirt without a stain. After thirty-seven years of foster homes, desert gangs and international task forces, he's come to rely on the axiom that men are much more alike than they are different; all you have to do is look for it, and Cole’s always had a pretty good eye. Not the best he's ever seen, but pretty damn good.

The recall was in summer and autumn is well on its way. Already Cole can feel a cooler breeze when he slots open his window to survey the base below. Winston and Lena have led a comprehensive rehabilitation, mostly focusing on the outdated and Talon-sieged security systems, but the old rock still needs a lot of work and Cole thinks it’d be nice to have her good and polished by spring. Gibraltar will never be Geneva, but he likes it better already: more sun, less wolves.

He dresses quick and easy, as always. Jeans and a brown button-up. He yanks on his boots and stomps to make the heel slide in true. He slides his hat down from his forehead back and licks the brim with his left pointer finger—an unconscious gesture he's performed since puberty, no different now that his fingers are made of metal. He checks himself in the full-length mirror fixed against the door. He licks his teeth (clean enough), checks his gut (small enough), and takes inventory of the gray in his beard (not yet noticeable). His age reveals itself only in laugh lines and crow's feet. Not that he'd care. Cole's never had a problem with gray. On some people, it looks downright gorgeous.

He's had more than a few problems with *gorgeous.* There's probably still bits of glass in his ankle.

The mess hall was one of the first areas to be refurbished. Winston intended to leave it for later, said there were more crucial facilities that needed their attention, but Lúcio and Cole took it upon themselves to clean the place out. They both agreed that it'd be nice to have a gathering place that wasn't someone's office or outdoors, that it's important for the team to eat together. Lúcio in particular seemed eager to create an environment of *a família* for however long he stuck around. Brazil is still his first priority, he admitted to Cole as they moved in wooden picnic tables from storage. He's already working on a follow-up to his album. The kid loves to wax nostalgic about *meu bairro* , and though Cole can relate, he knows Winston hopes to show him that his greatest possible impact could be at Gibraltar. The gunslinger is happy to assist in the convincing. A new Overwatch will need new blood.

Cole lights a cigarillo in the cramped elevator and remembers one late night when, after scrubbing the stainless steel to a high mirror shine, he and Lúcio shared a six-pack under the stars and Lúcio told him that, sometimes, music made him see colors. He could hear certain chords and corresponding hues would wash over his senses in waves: D major, a sort of yellow-orange; C minor, a dark purple. Talked about the kids back home and how no one believed him. Cole replied by saying that he has, on more than one occasion, seen things that others couldn't—things that had saved his life, saved the lives of others. Didn't seem a stretch to consider others might experience something similar. Then he told Lúcio how he'd once spotted an alien eating at a diner on Route 66 and the DJ had to call bullshit.

The gunslinger moves the cigarillo in between his teeth and thinks about how he ought to tell Lena that story. She and Lúcio were becoming fast friends, along with Hana, Mei. Even Fareeha. Everyone was gelling in a way the cowboy couldn't have predicted, would never have hoped for. He looks down a long alley where the sea meets the sky and notices how, again, they manage to strike the same brilliant chord; a blended shade of bright azure, a seamless horizon. Can't tell where the earth ends nor heaven begins. Not quite his idea of paradise, but damn near.

He's not sure if or how himself fits into that pleasant gradient, but stranger things have happened.

When he enters the mess hall, he's the kind of grin that prompts the good doctor: “What are you up to, Cole Cassidy?”

“Nothin’ yet, Angie,” Cole touches her shoulder on the way to the coffee machine, “But the morning's just begun. Where’s everybody else?”

Angela sips espresso from a tiny porcelain cup,—a byproduct of her own special addition to the mess hall. Woman has a caffeine addiction that overtakes Cole's liquor proclivities by a mile. “Genji is with Zenyatta. I believe they eat and meditate in the east cliffs every morning. Torbjörn and Reinhardt are working on the new anti-aircraft systems. I don’t know where the rest are.”

“Thought Lúcio was making the grub today.”

Angela takes a bite of her croissant and shrugs, tapping through patient charts on her personal holopad.

Cole grunts. So much for *a família* . He slides on over to the stovetop behind her and perks immediately when he finds bacon alongside all the other English, Spanish, and Mediterranean foods that made up the unique cuisine of their chosen country. “Guess it’s just you and me then, doc.”

“For today. I believe our schedules will regulate once repairs are complete, no? It will be good, after this transitional period, to establish some semblance of normalcy.”

“Gonna have to figure out what ‘normal’ is, first. Ain’t gonna be like last time.”

“ *Mol* . We will have to do many things differently.”

Cole whistles as he strikes fire under the pan. “I reckon we’re off to a fine start. Winston ‘n Lena make quite a pair.”

Angela speaks with an upward lilt, “Indeed! It will be interesting to see how they operate in Russia. Though I never thought I’d see either of them in a leadership position.”

“Can see it clear enough now, that's for damn sure. Winston’s got brass, and don’t get me started on Lena. Girl didn't need a chronal accelerator to beat time. Though, t’tell you the truth,” Cole grins, glances over his shoulder, “Sort’ve thought I’d see you behind the wheel this time around.”

“Me? *Nein* ,” Angela brushes crumbs from her lips, “I am a doctor, not a general.”

“Winston’s a scientist, Lena’s a pilot... Plus, you got seniority.”

“Overwatch has never been a place where the oldest fighters become the de facto leaders.”

“Don’t I know it.” He cracks eggs over sizzling butter.

“And you, Cole? You are certainly capable." Angela rises and brings her dish to the wash unit, an angel at his shoulder. "Do you not see a future in which you are in command?”

Or a devil; it's always been a little tough for Cole to tell when Angela is picking on him, like a smarter older sister. But he's not threatened—if only because he's rarely been on the losing side of a battle of wits. "Ain't one for givin' orders. Can't hardly follow the rules as is."

"There are pills for that, *mein liebling* ."

Now he *knows* he's being teased. "Ha," Cole scoffs, his tone an improbable mixture of both cocky and humble, "Ain't a cure for what I got. You know that better'n most, doc."

He turns to see her smiling beatifically as she points at his eggs and bacon. "See how shiny your food is? That is what makes your shirts stick out at the bottom."

"Now listen here, *Heidi*— it's too early for this kind of abuse. I ain't had to poke extra holes in my belt just yet. If you talk Winston into letting me and Lena throw a party, I'll dance y'round the comm tower and we'll see who's still spry."

Angela laughs like a bell and Cole finds it even more nourishing than her Caduceus. Then she waves her hand and drifts out of the room. "I hope you know how to polka!"

Cole takes his plate and his coffee and walks outside to eat on the loading dock; the day's too beautiful to waste. He finds a nice patch of grass, leans against warm steel sliding and toasts his mug to the sun.

Gibraltar is a place he associates with both difficult days and cloistered shelter. A safe nest cut into the rock, a hideout for when they had to hunker down and lay low. Just a few dozen miles from the cradle of civilization; maybe the capital-P Paradise. A touch-point in the center of a troubled world, far from the pastoral immaculacy of Switzerland and the familiarity of North America. The only mountains here are barren cliffs, whipped by wind and water, their histories written into their scars like old soldiers. He can see the same white-throated swifts zooming around the coast, or, more likely, the next generation. Cole wonders if their parents decided to stick around after the attacks.

Then he remembers Ana, who was fond of birds, and how she'd once said to him that the rock was a migratory environment more than it was a permanent home. Another temporary stop on the way to someplace better.

Ain't that the goddam truth , Cole thinks.

Memories of the sniper threaten to blot out his bliss, but he's gotten good at pushing down thoughts of Ana. His old mentor wouldn't want him to be blue. Not when there's work to be done.

His eyes follow the swifts to the top of the comm tower, where the beacon ticks faintly in the sunlight. He can hear drones over the wind—they're still scouring off scorch marks and reinforcing the railing. He can pick out sounds from Torbjörn's chop shop: the whine of a

massive saw and Reinhardt's booming laugh, both of which they can probably hear all the way from Barcelona. Stuck in the rock face is Winston's lab. Before that are the east dormitories, where Cole's eyes linger, though he's on the wrong side of the building to see what he's looking for.

He swigs his coffee and goes over yesterday in his head: the heat of dusk and the sudden, heart-stopping sight of the wandering archer whom he'd immediately recognized from his photo. He remembers when Genji showed it to him: the haughty scowl, the strong jaw, the already muscular, imposing form. Cole'd always had a thing for old photos, and this was a good one; two brothers, alike in dignity if nothing else, captured forever in a moment that was probably pretty rare. No worries, no squabbles. Fresh off the practice fields, the world at their calloused fingertips. Cole's spent enough time in Japan to know the uppermost of the upper crust when he sees it. He usually has a knee-jerk dislike for the rich and even more for the evil rich, but even he couldn't deny Hanzo's eyes.

Genji told him a little and the photo told him the rest, but it was all woefully inadequate when confronted with the real thing. The ten-or-so years between that snapshot and now had been good to the archer, at least where his looks were concerned. He'd more than grown into those sharp features; he'd transformed, crystallized, came out a man of such regal and gloomy beauty that he rivals the best Cole's ever seen. Even from a hundred yards back, the gunslinger registered the imposing stare, lofty and impatient, as if the sun itself were competing for attention that was rightfully his. Surely if the planets are going to orbit anything, it should be those cheekbones, those shoulders. Those *eyes.*

Hanzo Shimada in the flesh, backlit by a tangerine sunset. *Hoo-ee* . Cole shakes his head, wonders how he even survived. Reinhardt practically had to finish unloading supplies by himself—the cowboy was out of commission, useless. Struck dumb by Cupid's arrow.

'Cept Cupid's got a mean mug and a sadistic sense of humor , some sober voice chimes in. *Did you forget that bottle?*

It takes Cole a full minute to realize he's grinning ear to ear and humming an ancient tune he only knows from those movies that used to play over and over again in the waiting room at his first foster center: *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*

Then he sighs a long sigh and the voice laughs at him. *Cowboy, what* are *you up to?*

An hour later, he's outside Hanzo's dorm and pushing the buzzer with his free right hand. The metal one is balancing a bowl of rice and—knowing that a big guy needs big meals—a plate piled high with as many eggs as he could stack. He'd even scrounged up some plain wooden chopsticks and what has got to be really strong green tea; Cole thinks he can see it growing inside its stainless steel cup. Maybe he added too much leaf.

"Shimada?"

Probably not home. Cole imagines he keeps a strict schedule, similar to Genji's: early to rise, meditation, training… And he knows that Hanzo is only here for brotherly reconciliation. Only right to assume they're together.

"C'mon, partner. Just tryn'a be neighborly here."

A simpler explanation: Cole's being ignored.

That's fine. The rock attracts many different kinds of odd birds, but they all have to learn to live together eventually. Cole leaves the tray by the door and lights up another cigarillo on the way to the elevators. Hanzo may control dragons, but he's still just a man, and a man's gotta eat.

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0013 Days Until Launch

Hana is at the tail-end of a special tournament, one she says will help to fund the upcoming mission in Russia. She organized it herself. Just a handful of her favorite opponents and a few hundred thousand close friends and sponsors battling it out in StarCraft for the good of the free world, she tells Cole at dinner. It's the least she can do, she adds, and that it will be *sweet* to get behind the console again. Cole recognizes the look in her eye when she talks about it. Like how he probably looks when someone mentions a quickdraw or drinking contest; the excitement of doing what you do best, the opportunity to show off a little. Hana's alliance with Overwatch may be as tenuous as Lúcio's, but she's a soldier they're lucky to have. At least until South Korea calls her home.

He sees just how lucky a few nights later, when he's walking back to his dorm with sore muscles and mission details buzzing like horse flies inside his skull. It's been a long time since he's faced down something with this much pressure behind it. While he relishes the opportunity to face a bigger and better Goliath after so many years of bounties and petty do-gooding, the transition's not as smooth as it might've been a decade ago. So many years in the saddle will have you walking funny for awhile. After bureaucracy back-and-forth and endless contingency discussions, all he wants is a fresh cigar, a sea salt breeze, and the bottle of whiskey waiting by his window.

It's not without some measure of longing that he pictures how easily Hanzo Shimada fits inside that scene. Man likes to drink, for sure. Cole's sure he'd enjoy the whiskey, even if it isn't top shelf. But the archer is silent at every dinner and even more silent at meetings. Cole doesn't dare intrude upon the man's personal bubble again; if his manners didn't dictate such, his pride sure does. Plus, he knows better than to approach a wild horse before it's had a chance to get used to its paddock. Doubly so if it has a history of biting.

He thinks it's late enough that he can sneak by Hana's room unnoticed, but his spurs betray him; the second he passes her open door, Lúcio calls his name. He and Hana are sitting on the floor with soda and packaged snacks, pleading for good company and "bad" stories. Cole hesitates (he can practically hear the whiskey calling his name), but Lúcio ropes him in with Reinhardt's beer and *a família* .

Besides, he figures, *isn't every day a cowboy gets to pal around with two global celebrities.*

The conversation goes from video games to fighting to six-shooters vs. MEKA to who's the better shot, and then Hana's talked Cole into letting her try on his boots, which turns into a duel in the middle of the hallway.

They both have candy and nutrition bars sticking out of their pockets, except for Cole, who refuses to carry anything but chocolate in his holster. The overhead hallway light serves as a high noon sun. The mostly empty dorms offer a cavernous silence. Hana narrows her eyes and spits to the side while Cole's fingers dance above a Snickers bar. Lúcio warbles fearfully in the doorway, clutching one of Hana's white shirts, on the threshold of fainting.

"Lord above," he cries out in a terrible Southern accent, "When *will* the bloodshed end?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Hana grits out, her tiny voice as grizzled as she can make it, "Justice has to be served."

"Only thing you'll be servin'," Cole rumbles, "Is stale granola."

"Oh, I just can't stand it!"

Lúcio tosses the shirt in the air and Cole calls *draw;* he hits the shirt, Hana, and then Lúcio for good measure. All three fall to the ground; death by chocolate.

"Hey, I was a *civilian* , Cole! Not cool! Not heroic!"

"You're the one said I had to be the bad guy," Cole drawls, spinning an extra candy bar around his fingers as he saunters up to Hana's remains. "Y'had it comin', Sheriff."

"You hit me right in the *eyeball!"* Hana curls up like a pill bug.

"Well, Winston could prob'ly fix you up with a shiny new one. Y'like pink, right?" Cole offers her a hand.

At which point Hana rolls onto her back and whips a fig newton right in his face.

“Owned.”

A direct hit; Cole reels, lumbers backwards, holds his hands over his heart (“He got hit in the face though,” Lúcio points out,) he stumbles, goes to one knee, and looks up at the hallway light as if it’s the portal to heaven.

“Always knew... I’d go out like this.” He falls backwards.

“Cassidy! No—you cannot die!” Hana has apparently switched characters, wrapping her arms around Cole’s shoulders, cradling him dramatically. Her acting is incredible; Cole thinks he can see real tears in her eyes. “What will we do without you? Who will tell dumb jokes? Who will bring me snacks? Eugh,” she leans back from Cole, “You stink... who even still smokes anymore?”

“Just... do me a favor…” Cole chokes, doing a too-good impression of someone losing a lot of blood.

Hana sobs, “Anything, cowboy!”

“Tell Lúcio… that he’s a dick.”

Cole croaks.

Hana drops him like a sack of potatoes, slowly rises, and then stoically places one over-sized boot on his corpse.

Lúcio walks over and lifts Hana’s arm, “Long live the Queen!”

Cole rises from the dead with a zombie-like growl and they scream and scatter into Hana's room just as Fareeha sticks her head out her door and tells them all to shut the hell up.

Cole lumbers after them, but he’s too tipsy—he sways, he laughs, he knocks loudly against a comm station and trips over his own spurs. Lucio pelts him with empty soda cans, which he picks up and lobs back. Hana gasps and snorts, shouting louder than both combined, “HEY! We are in a *military dormitory* you ding-dongs!"

Cole shuffles to his room with his boots tucked under his arm and his pride tucked somewhere underneath a warm glow he didn’t know he’d been missing.

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0010 Days Until Launch

Cole knew he'd run into Hanzo eventually. The archer is a practiced recluse; aside from dinners and meetings, his comings and goings are evidenced only by the fluctuations in tea stores and an unusually preoccupied Genji, but Cole knows better than anyone that the Gibraltar base isn't that big. Couldn't hide a mouse for long in those units, no matter how deep the caverns go. And someone like Hanzo isn't the kind to sit up in a shitty little room forever. The two men were bound to come into close quarters sooner or later.

Cole just didn't expect it to hit him so hard. Again.

He can only shrug it off and conclude that he'll probably never stop being startled by the sight of Hanzo Shimada. For however long he sticks around.

It happened when the cowboy, out to get some gun time, stops dead at the entrance of a massive holo-hanger he'd long ago dubbed 'the shooting range:' a three-story training bay outfitted with holographic projectiles and hard-light technology, specifically outfitted for long-range combat simulations with multiple environmental hazards. It's his favorite simulation bay on the rock, even though he never got a chance to use it much back in the day. Again, Gibraltar was a migratory perch; just a stop on the way to somewhere else.

Hanzo, though he makes no show of it, definitely hears the cowboy enter. Cole gives only a small 'howdy' and maintains a careful distance. He folds his arms and leans back against the wall, content to watch for awhile. Take it all in. See the sights.

And Lord above, what a sight to see. Hanzo's form is impeccable. He flows through the movements of nocking and drawing and firing his bow like water, second-nature. As effortless as breathing. He's purposefully slow, as thoughtful and devoted as a monk in prayer. As if this were much more to him than mere martial training. Cole can see years of constant dedication, from his rock-solid stance to the way his fingers fold across the string.

But there's also a wrinkle in his brow and a distance in his eyes that Cole knows well. The archer has more on his mind than the direction of his arrows. This meditative ritual is wrapped up in something else, something far away. His thoughts are not all in the room.

Gabriel Reyes had that look, towards the end.

But Cole sighs with admiration all the same. Which seems to make Hanzo's arrow land a couple inches away from dead-center.

Cole sees the archer's back tense. He doesn't look at Cole as he slides another arrow from his quiver and mutters, "I should not be surprised to discover that a man who dresses like *that* is incapable of discerning animosity in others."

Cole rises along with his hackles. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Hanzo nocks another arrow, “that I do not like you.” Another bull’s-eye. “If you wish to use this facility, you will wait until I have finished.”

“S’free country,” Cole drawls, unaffected. He walks closer like he owns the place, the click of his spurs bouncing off the walls. “I wasn’t planning on interrupting.”

“Yet you have, and continue to.”

“Hold up now. I came to apologize, Shimada.”

A lie, and an obvious one, but Hanzo still turns to look at him. Cole inadvertently pauses to soak in those eyes: dark around the edges, underneath, and inside. Deep and intangible. He feels brave just meeting them.

“I know it ain’t proper, hollering like that, especially where you’re from. I know better. Just got carried away.” A bit of his grin returns. “I mean, you’re a real damn sight, Shimada, you're—” He cuts himself off with a swallow at Hanzo’s ever-souring expression, “—Well, you're something, that’s for sure. But that ain't an excuse, so, like I said. Apologies.”

He removes his hat and gives a nod, something he hopes resembles a proper bow. Hanzo says nothing.

Then Cole tilts his head up, sweeps his hair back with his hat and meets Hanzo’s mean expression with one of his own. Under the shadow of the brim, his eyes narrow to slits.

“All that being said... I ain’t no choir boy, so if y’go and do something like chuck a bottle at me again, it’s hands. Square?”

The archer raises a brow before turning back to his practice. As if Cole had ceased to exist.

The gunslinger's jaw grinds in its hinges. He glances around, seeking traction, until his eyes land on the command office on the platform above. Then he glances back at Hanzo, scratching his beard.

He takes on a more thoughtful, nonchalant tone as he strolls behind the archer. “Seeing as how all the other hangars are taken... how’s ‘bout we team up? Got a mission coming up and I could sure use the exercise—”

“This hanger is the only simulation deck that facilitates my needs, which do not include the use of a ‘partner.’” Another arrow hits its mark.

Innocent as a lamb: “Doesn’t seem like you’ve set up much of a challenge here neither.”

Hanzo slowly turns his head over his shoulder.

Cole keeps idly wandering, “I mean... standing there all still, knocking dummies from 'bout two hundred yards—”

“I was synthesizing my spiritual practice with the *kyūdō* techniques handed down to me from a tradition thousands of years old.”

“Just warming up then, huh?”

Hanzo lowers his head as if brandishing horns. His entire face is a series of edges that cumulate at the golden sash, a garment far too elegant for such choppy hair. Viewing his lowered face from above creates the pointed effect of an angry hawk—or a swift, Cole thinks.

He wonders how many men have died with that face as their last view. *Not a bad way to go.*

“Well,” Cole says, jerking a thumb towards the wall controls, “I’ve got a holo-program that’ll really test your metal. Maybe we could make a lil’ contest outta the proceedings, seeing as how I know this room’s functions inside-and-out, and you needing to stretch those lil' legs something fierce—”

Hanzo starts towards him like a predator: consistent in thought and execution, driven toward the singular purpose of murder. It maybe should not be as attractive as it is.

Cole opts to cross his arms and keep his grin. You don't grow up where he's from and stand down from a challenge. And you don’t go head to head with Gabriel Reyes almost every day for ten-odd years and come out shirking from fear.

Except that Hanzo is now very close, and though he barely reaches the gunslinger’s chin, Cole no longer feels like the tallest man in the room.

The archer's words are as precise as his aim: “set up your simulation.”

Cole obliges with a tip of his hat, counts his blessings that he got out of that big gamble with an even bigger win. He steps lightly to the wall panel, taps the controls and loads up his favorite program: Desert 04.

The lights mimic an arid landscape at noon, hard shadows and desaturated colors. Towers emerge from the floor, some a hundred feet high. Other sections sink low, making craters and ridges where before was solid steel. Hanzo casually moves out of the way as the ground morphs below his feet; he steps left, slides right, adapts to his environment with all the concern of a cat navigating an earthquake. He sneers as little red drones emerge from ports in the walls and hover menacingly between the tower canyons, buzzing in pre-programmed patterns.

Then Cole thinks, *it’s only neighborly* , and adds some green ground units too: wiry bipedal omnics, each armed with glowing blades.

Hanzo is full-on glaring when Cole returns, but the cowboy busies himself with double-checking Peacekeeper. Besides—Cole’s been in too many groups of menacing hard-asses, been at the receiving end of too many mean mugs, had his head kicked in way too many times to give one more scowl a second thought. Especially when he realizes—spinning his gun back into its holster with flair—that he’s liable to do anything just to keep Hanzo’s eyes on him.

Hope it doesn't get me killed.

“Alright now. Twenty drones, twelve omnics. Clean headshots’ll take ‘em out, body-shots’ll take a bit more. First one to thirty-one wins.”

“A game,” Hanzo scoffs, “I should have known. Even your training is a joke to you.”

“That mean y’ain’t gonna play?”

He thinks that maybe he’s pushed it too far. He thinks that Hanzo is gonna bail. Start practicing in the hills just to get away from Cole.

But Hanzo just looks him up and down like he's deciding whether or not to kill him then and there, then speaks with his driest tone yet. “Just tell me why.”

“Why, what?”

Hanzo sweeps his palm up, gestures to all of Cole. “Why do you dress like this? You are not on a ranch. You are not starring in a Western film. What is the point?”

Cole grins. “Trust me, Shimada—my clothes are the least interesting thing about me.”

Hanzo scoffs, literally turns up his nose. But he hasn’t left yet.

Cole tosses back the red serape with his metal hand like he's turning it into a hero's cape. “Ready, partner?”

The archer rolls his shoulder, readies his stance, and lifts his hand to gesture the universal sign: *bring it on* .

It was light when Cole entered the shooting range; it’s nearly light again when he exits. The southeast wind has picked up and whistles sharply up the concrete paths, funneled through artificial canyons created by rock and steel. The cowboy removes his hat and lets the breeze cool his over-heated body while he assesses the bruises on his arms and the two arrows lodged in his serape.

“Could'a killed me,” Cole mutters, a weird little grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. He works out the arrows and hands them back to Hanzo.

The archer is much less worse for wear, but his hair is loose in its knot and his *kyūdō-gi* sags more than usual. It’s all Cole can do to keep his eyes level—his *obi* is hanging low enough to show the V of his hips.

Hanzo huffs, casual, like he’s never been out of breath in his life. “I thought about it.”

“Incredible,” Cole shakes his head, not exactly sure what he’s referring to but confident in the emotion behind it. “Same time tomorrow?”

Hanzo raises a brow. “You wish to repeat that simulation?”

“Hell no. Think I still got drone coolant in my ear. I got other simulations, less challenging, so I don’t, y’know, kill myself before the mission. Still good stuff. Lotta surprises.” Cole fishes for a cigar, then fishes for his lighter. “They'll keep ya spry.”

Hanzo shrugs his shoulder, casts his indiscernible gaze out to the sea. “I can train with Genji.”

Cole lights up and shrugs, nonchalant. “Sure, that’s an option. Probably easier, too, considering he’s your brother. Probably know his moves inside n’ out—”

“These feeble attempts to work my pride to your advantage—such psychological mastery must have served you well in your Blackwatch.”

Cole exhales and looks at Hanzo from behind a veil of thick smoke. They stare in a miniature face-off.

No point in asking where an assassin gets his intel. In all likelihood, Cole’s got just as much dirt on Hanzo. For the third time that night, Cole's thoughts cross Gabriel Reyes: Blackwatch commander, covert-ops specialist, American-made super soldier. Hard-ass extraordinaire. Dealing with Hanzo gives him a feeling similar to the one Gabe sometimes gave him; one of equal parts excitement and dread. This man is a boss—born to authority. Someone fully assured of their innate superiority, always following their own set of rules. Cole's looking at both ally and enemy and waiting to see which suit will come out on top.

Hanzo crosses his arms. He's likely considering something similar. They’re both clever, both resourceful, and they both know Genji—a source of information as detailed as it is unreliable. Both have no reason to trust the other, nothing to gain nor lose by association. Both of them have loaded weapons and Cole would just as soon save his ammo for when he really needs it.

But Hanzo is like the sun: too hot, too bright, a gravitational pull that just might bring the cowboy to a perfect end, the one he's always dreamed of: a blaze of glory. He should look away but is compelled to stare. He thinks that, if the ex-yakuza refuses this offer, it might just break his heart. Force him to live out this rough recall on a distant rock with just his hard-on and his visions to keep him company at night. Cole doesn't know if he can handle living on the base, struggling through a rebuild he only partially believes will be successful, haunted by ghosts and misgivings alike, and not be able to see Hanzo like this: disheveled, flushed. High off of victory and preening like an emperor.

The gunslinger crushes his eyes beneath his lids, half-turns away and focuses on the smoke in his lungs as that old song floats unbidden and ludicrous back between his ears: *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*

Then Hanzo says, “Tell me truly why you wish to train together.”

Cole purses his lips around the cigar and takes another drag. The smoke blows slow and straight. He shrugs with his brows and then stares at Hanzo from a thousand miles away. He can't help but notice how they both have the kind of look where it seems like they're always frowning.

Maybe they have more in common than he knows.

“Y’already know I like looking at you.”

Hanzo stares. Cole takes another drag, scratches his beard and thinks, well, that’s that. Fish in a barrel. Cupid’s got a clean shot.

Then the archer scoffs as he strides away, his low voice almost lost on the wind.

“Better pray your roving eyes don’t get you killed tomorrow.”

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0002 Days Until Launch.

After the last mission briefing in Winston’s lab, Cole invites Fareeha out for a drive. The sky is painted with erratic clouds from horizon to zenith, a study in textures gray and white—Cole points it out while they share Turkish coffee on the balcony. Terrible visibility, he says. Best move the flight training to tomorrow, he says. She points out his obvious ploy, takes his cookies, and agrees on one condition: she gets to be behind the wheel.

Fareeha hoists herself onto the seat and kicks her boots together to knock off the dirt. “You've been to this market before?”

“Who do you think makes sure we always have bacon?” Cole climbs in with mud-caked soles and falls on the seat like a sack of bricks. "And *japonesa?* And donuts? And—"

“Good!" Fareeha snaps the door shut and adjusts her mirrors. "Then everyone will know who you are and we can work down the prices.”

“Your tactical genius's why I invited you,” Cole declares. “That, and y’always laugh at my stories.”

“Except now I have heard them all,” Fareeha snickers, starting the engine.

“Hey, I been on the run for years now. I got loads a'new material. Tales that’ll make your hair curl.”

“Low blow, Cole. You know I cannot get my hair to curl.”

She takes off like a bat out of hell. Her driving is as aggressive as it is precise; Cole can’t exactly put his feet up on account of the bumps, but he feels as safe and as joyful as a bird riding a thermal. As they pull around the western cliffside, he tilts his chin at the whorling sky and squints against two blinding glares on the highest precipice: Genji and Zenyatta, meditating in the wind, dazzling even through the silvery atmosphere.

He sticks an elbow out the window and spins her a yarn, starts way back at the beginning: lonesome journeys through the dusty red canyons of the upper southwest. Hovercycles and his own two loping legs. Camping next to waterfalls that spill into crater pools blue as robins' eggs. Steep gorges and patchwork mesas his only points of navigation. A yawning desert and ancient highways. Freedom and emptiness all wrapped up in sharp shadows and endless dust. Less glamorous: running from the law, hard-fought bounties and shady deals gone wrong. Bad bars and worse card games. He’s sure she’s heard some of it before, but it feels good to go over old impressions, to solidify the memories and find new colors for later re-tellings. To decide what to keep and what to let go. Shaping it all for her benefit; Fareeha Amari, the true-blue. The only daughter of Ana Amari and the last sort of person Cole'd ever expected to wind up as scrapbook-childhood-friends.

His stories last through the drive there, the market, and halfway through the drive back. And he lays the groundwork for heavier tales, the ones he needs to get off his chest to someone, anyone; like the time he shot down a bounty in Reno and tried to lay low in Santa Monica until the authorities caught up with him at a beachside motel.

“Do you know how many stories you have told me,” Fareeha interjects, “That end with you almost dying inside a small room? Or a cramped hallway? Or a stairwell?”

“Hey now, there’s a big difference between almost-dying and close-quarters-shoot-outs.”

"You are a great shot.” Fareeha adjusts her brown and white *keffiyeh.* “When I first saw you, I thought you were the coolest guy I had ever met. So charming and confident." She peers through her peripheral vision with straight-A-student judgment that Cole somehow finds charming. "Now I realize you were just a lucky brat.”

“Y’thought I was cool, huh?” Cole arches his metal arm behind her chair.

Fareeha gives him a half-amused look. "You already knew that I did."

“Well,” Cole drawls, flashing a wide grin, “Never meet your heroes.”

“I'm lucky I even did meet you. Mother always herded me away when you and your crew came around. If she weren't so busy all the time, I'm sure she would've stopped me from hanging around any Blackwatch boys at all.”

Cole’s right hand finds his lighter; he flicks it as he looks out the window. Ana's scowl is as easy to recall as her smile. “She did, huh?”

“Of course. You were all black-vested bad asses with dark pasts and shady jobs. I am sure many mothers before her have tried to keep their daughters away from you.”

“And sons, yeah.”

“To no avail!”

“Knock on wood.”

“I am sure she would have stopped me from hanging around Overwatch members, too. If there were any other choice.” Fareeha’s voice is always so clipped, so regimented, that it’s hard for Cole to ever tell genuine tension from simple military edge; always *en pointe,* as Gerard used to say. "As it was, there was nowhere else for me to go."

“Naw, she wanted you there. Your mama knew a good egg when she saw one and Overwatch was full of 'em. Woman had the Eye, she knew what was what. Couldn’t stand me when we first met and for damn good reason. Reyes scraped me off'a Route 66, put me chest plate, shoved me into rank and she quite rightly pointed n'said, 'Hey, where’d you get that roadkill?' Took me years to earn even half the trust she put in guys like Reinhardt n'Torb, and she always made sure you stuck around their like.”

“Yes, well,” Fareeha sighs, a bitter sort of smile gracing her proud lips, “It's funny how her attempts to keep me from that life only pushed me closer to it.”

Cole grunts. “Reckon I’d’ve done the same. But, I get your meanin'. Same thing more or less happened t’me.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, ma’am. Two words: Jack fuckin’ Morrison.” Cole puts a cigarillo between his teeth, though he can't light it with that wind. “He never outright told me I wasn’t Overwatch material, but I knew." The truck shudders over a rocky divot in the road. "We took one look at each other and thought we had more than enough to go off of. He thought I was scum, I was sure. Can’t say I thought much better of him. Mister Midwestern quarterback, good lil’ Eagle Scout. But Gabe loved him, an’ that’s the kinda endorsement you don’t lightly put aside. Still—proving Jack Morrison wrong became as much a mission to me as any of the ops we ran. Was real damn motivating. For awhile, at least.”

“Hm,” Fareeha smiles, “Maybe that was his goal all along.”

"Maybe. Man knew how to make soldiers."

How easily he flashes back to the last few months of his Overwatch career—as if they were burned hotter, deeper into his heart. Branded like a steer. Long nighttime talks with Jack, crossed-armed against the wall, those Commander-blue-eyes creased with years of bureaucratic pains that Cole wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. Then those looks on Gabe's face after Cole'd just come from talking to Jack. Like Cole'd been cheating on him or something. How Cole'd started lying to them both, reassuring both. How it never seemed to make any difference.

"He was as much'a my brother as Gabe was, in the end." Cole looks out the window and crosses himself.

Fareeha hums. *"Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un."*

"Inshallah, 'Reeha."

Cole looks across at his friend, her strong, beautiful face framed by pearlescent cloud. Fareeha isn't much younger than him, and they did grow up together in those young adult years, but she had an actual childhood. Birthdays and karate lessons. You can see it on her face. She moves through the world with the assurance that, no matter her mistakes, she can forgive herself, because she had once been taught right from wrong. Triple A trainee, top of her class. A true soldier. A proper graduate from the school of Commander John Francis "Jack" Morrison.

It's a pity she's working for Helix now. Private security? Shit—Cole can think of more than a few words to say against that. But he's got so few family left. He's not about to stir the shit by asking Fareeha why she decided to become someone's hired cop.

He feels a touch of anxiety, like there's something he's forgotten but can't quite identify. Some lost regret. Not even the memory of his misdeed to bring reason to the feeling.

He rubs an old scar by his ribs and looks out the window.

"Tell me one more story, Cole."

His robotic hand pets the back of her silky head just once before returning to his lap. "Anything for you, Robocop."

"How did you lose the arm?"

"Rattlesnake. Went and jumped me from a branch in a Louisiana swamp. Thank Christ I had that machete. Had to go'n chop it off then and there."

Fareeha snickers and searches for a heavy metal radio station. "Everything is a joke to you, isn't it?"

"Only the important shit."

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0004 Hours Before Launch.

The launch pad thrums with whirring engines, crackling electricity and hard people with hard jobs to do. Cole sits on the edge of a crate while he assembles, cleans, and re-assembles weapons with Fareeha and Hana. It's the only kind of mindless military work that he doesn't have a problem with— *gives you time to think* , as Jack used to say. What a farmer Morrison would've been. Picturing it still makes Cole smile.

Fareeha is silent, her lids heavy, a professional to the T; Hana is wearing large pink headphones and bobbing to a sprightly K-pop beat. Both of them slide cylinders faster than most of the soldiers at old Overwatch did. He can't help the sinking in his guts when he watches them; new blood is great, it's what they need. But it spills just as easy.

Big sea gulls jeer with braying cries near the edge of the tarmac where Torbjörn and his eldest daughter, Brigitte, load mobile turrets into the Orca's launch bay. Reinhardt wrestles with the configuration on his shield barrier nearby while Brigitte teases him—always a good rapport between the old knight and his goddaughter. Lúcio helps Angela with the medevac prep and Winston, ever diligent, re-formats some of his OWLS to help triangulate the comm tower's satellite signal. He keeps having Lena re-adjust the alignment, her chronal accelerator zipping up and down the dish, creating arcing wisps of light trails and further agitating the gulls.

Overkill , says a voice in Cole's head. *Too much thinking makes for a dull fighter. When you pull the trigger, your mind should be blank.*

As the cool wind stings his eyes, he wonders to which dead commander the voice belongs. Ana? Gabe? Jack? Or is that an authentic Cole Cassidy original?

As if there's anything authentic about you , a voice laughs. That one's unaccounted for.

"Hey, cowboy. Check it out."

Cole's eyes go up to where Hana points. Atop the comm tower stand the Shimada brothers: poised and deadly, twin sashes whipping in the gusts. So high up as to be guaranteed their privacy. The youngest looks out at the ocean while the eldest watches the activity below— silver and black; shine and shadow.

Hana snaps a magazine into its chamber and picks up another rifle. "Y'think Genji will teach me some ninja moves? I'd like to be able to climb up that high."

"Who needs to climb," Fareeha smiles, "When you have rocket boosters?"

Hana grins. "Too true! Hey, Cole's training with Hanzo. He teach you anything cool yet?"

Cole notices Fareeha's jaw set tight; her low opinion of Hanzo is no secret.

The cowboy smiles at the ground, tilts down the brim of his hat and mutters, "Gonna smoke," before he heads off.

He saunters up the tarmac to the sun-bleached patch of grass behind the lab cubicle. Tiny yellow flowers flicker in the powerful wind while the surf splashes high over the rocks. He forgoes the tobacco, sucks deep the sea air and then lets it out as slow as he can.

Just another mission , he tells himself, with his own voice this time. *Just like all the ones before. No two ways about it.*

He casts his squinting gaze up the comm tower, but the brothers are gone. So are the gulls. The swifts have taken their place, their crescent-shaped bodies swooping around the beacon like languid boomerangs against a blackening sky.

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0012 Hours After Mission Abort.

The lighthouse is dead when they get back to Gibraltar. The air smells like low tide and Cole's mouth tastes like iron. He doesn't realize he's been bleeding until he gets back to his room and sees his reflection in the full-length mirror on the inside of his door.

Another nameless voice blends with the ringing in his ears: *just how far back did you take that wrong turn, cowboy?*

His eyes squeeze shut. He pulls off his gloves, hangs his hat, and pulls up the hem of his treasured red serape: the only thing he truly owns. The fraying wool has a few more bullet

holes in the hem where they almost got him. His prosthetic arm is leaking fluid where they definitely did. He wonders why Angela didn't say anything about his busted lip or his busted metal. His thoughts blame her before he can catch them. *If she'd just stayed on the point—*

His head shakes, he speaks to the darkness: "no, no. It was a bad drop. Ain't no accounting for a bad drop."

Or was he at fault? Too stuck in his ways—not stuck enough? Working with one foot out the door already? Kneeling down for prayer with only a drop of faith in his cup?

Exhausted and moving like his joints need oiling, Cole strips. The serape whips to the bed, his protective chest-plate clangs to the floor. He tugs off his boots, his chaps, his trousers, his undersuit. He strips until he's standing bare in front of that mirror.

Out of the black, dozens of turquoise lights shine just bright enough to show his age.

Cole's jaw grinds to soreness. "'Nuffa this."

He pulls on jeans, a black t-shirt, and the same blood-stained boots before heading down to the mess hall.

"Good evening."

Cole jumps—startled yet again by the sight of Hanzo Shimada. He's sitting with his back to the door. He doesn't turn to confirm that it's Cole behind him. The cowboy's a little spooked until he remembers the spurs.

He grunts in lieu of a response and heads straight for the fridge. He glances back a few times, as if to confirm that, yes, the archer is there, in a white T and expensive gray sweats, eating microwave noodles at 2am like he's done it every day for years.

Ain't no clocks when you're on the run , Cole reminds himself. *Just the space between you and the law.*

The archer's voice is just above a whisper: "what went wrong?"

A cloud of anger muddies the gunslinger's face, darkens what isn't already obscured by beard and heavy brow. *No asking an assassin where he gets his intel.*

He shuts the fridge and practically saunters to Hanzo's table, wearing the kind of devil-may-care attitude better suited for a walk to the firing squad. He's got a bottle of Jack in one hand and a glass in the other.

"Be quicker to say what *didn't* go wrong."

The cowboy puts the whiskey on the table, then groans in misery; there's barely enough left for a ninety-pound woman to catch a buzz on an empty stomach, let alone for Cole to drown everything that needs drowning.

Hanzo chews in silence, looking at the bottle. His eyes flicker up to Cole, then settle on Cole's swollen lip. Then he brushes his own mouth before lifting the ouroboros gourd and giving it one short, blunt shake. It's full to the brim.

"Saké."

Cole slumps into the seat across, takes the gourd with a low 'thanks' and pours himself more than a shot's worth. "Pretty clear," he remarks, turning the glass in his mechanical hand, "Last saké I had was sort've white'n cloudy." He takes a quick swig, curls his lip back. "Tasted better, too."

"That was likely nigori saké," Hanzo leans his jaw on his knuckles. "You liked it because there is more sugar."

"Well, I got no use for sweetness tonight." Cole lifts the gourd again, raises a brow at Hanzo. "Y'mind?"

The archer lazily waves him the go-ahead. Cole fills his glass, notices how Hanzo watches his mechanical arm. That mixture of disdain and wariness—the same way he looks at Zenyatta, or Genji when he's in a low mood. He probably doesn't like cybernetics; typical old-fashioned prejudice. Cole can't say he didn't expect it, but it sours him all the same.

He swirls the drink a few times before meeting Hanzo's eyes. "Genji alright?"

Hanzo's lids are heavy, but his reply is quick. "No, he is not."

Cole bites the inside of his cheek. He knows better than to ask questions if he doesn't want the answers. He finishes the drink in one swig and fills his glass again. He fills Hanzo's while he's at it and the archer grunts in lieu of thanks.

The mess hall is, when empty, one of the quietest places on the base. The kitchen units are virtually silent, the only lights are high-up halogens, and its proximity to the interior rock makes for a yawning echo-chamber. Cole never noticed it before, but Before is starting to feel like a whole other world. Forget colonies on the moon; the past may as well have happened on Mars.

He opens his mouth to speak, to fill that absence with something, anything, but Hanzo gets there first:

"No talking. Just drink."

His eyes snap up. The archer is languid in his exhaustion, well on his way to being drunk, and Cole can see every line beneath those deep, dark, wicked brown eyes: like churning marble, whorled as if they endured years of dripping water. As if they've seen eons come and go yet remained essentially inviolate.

He looks so heart-achingly beautiful that Cole has to pour himself another.

The silence gets way under his skin and into places he'd rather not know. Hanzo continues to lean on his palm, sometimes going for another bite of food, but mostly just slouching and

drinking and staring at some place well beyond even Cole's capacity to see. He thinks the archer might doze off once or twice, but it never happens.

After an extended period of doing nothing but sneaking glances at the man's pretty face, Cole finally relents. He sighs heavy, leans back in his chair and looks up at the high ceiling like he might catch a star through the steel. The present leaks in and he feels himself sink. It's not as bad as he thought.

And they drink. They finish the saké, then the whiskey. Then Hanzo miraculously unearths a bottle of *soju* that Cole declares is both worse and better than all the moonshine he's ever tasted. Hanzo asks what moonshine is and Cole, taking any excuse to start talking again, tells him. Then he tells a couple stories from Appalachia, most of which he'd heard from Commander Morrison, who'd been stationed in northern Alabama for a couple months. Sensing Hanzo's interest in the natural world, Cole goes on, waxes poetic about the elements of Jack's stories that he likes best, details that soothe his dark mood: the Indiana prairie in spring and the explosion of life after long and dark winters. How you could smell the soil on the breeze and taste the sweetness of the grass in the cows' milk. He gets lyrical about corn fields and secret brooks and black oaks and little white flowers whose name Cole likes: *New Jersey tea* . He gets more inspired with images closer to home: hills of a hundred sienna layers, wild horses running alongside a parade of motorcycles. That time he saw the Andromeda Galaxy when he was lost in the desert after the third runaway attempt.

Eventually, Cole talks about bounty-hunting, including the run-in at the motel in Santa Monica. The moment sparks a memory he didn't tell Fareeha; how he swore he'd heard the first few notes of a *guitarrón* scale before he turned a corner and shot all three lawmen between the eyes.

Hanzo listens, offers a sound or a sleepy nod here and there, but overall is as watchful and silent as the rest of the room. Uncharacteristically nonjudgmental; a good listener. If Cole weren't so preoccupied with his own troubles, he might tease the archer about his lack of poise. The man keeps propping up his chin, going to scratch his beard and nodding downward, as if forgetting that his hand is the only thing keeping his head up. All his sharp muscles and pointy edges rapidly soften to a warm, pleasing blur; the picture, still beautiful, grows a little more complex.

Or maybe that's just the *soju* talking. When Cole catches himself staring way too long at the way Hanzo's t-shirt hugs his pecs, Cole decides it's time to go. The room feels hot and Cole's committed far too many drunken sins to let another one happen tonight.

So he rises, burps into his hand, and declares way-too-loudly: "Reckon I'll mosey on up to bed now, partner."

"Mosey," Hanzo agrees, unmoving.

Cole stands, realizes he's much more drunk than he thought he was, and nearly stumbles trying to get out of the table.

Hanzo laughs, a low and dry *heheh.* "Weakling."

"Ain't no fuckin' weak—shit, *you* try standing up."

"I..." Hanzo folds his arms and rests his head on top, "Will think about it."

"Y'ain't sleepin' here," Cole slurs, "You're gonna smart in the morning. I've fallen asleep on far too many bar tops to let it happen to a friend, trust."

"Not your friend, *partner* ," Hanzo laughs that short, cackling laugh again.

"C'mon, let's hit the hay." Cole comes around to help Hanzo up.

The archer refuses any assistance with a contemptuous swipe of his hand. Cole backs off, throwing up his hands.

With much effort that he tries very hard to disguise, Hanzo turns smoothly away from the table and plants his feet on the concrete floor. Then he rises with a long groan, swings his arms, and punches Cole's bicep. *Hard* .

"Jesus fuckin' Christ!"

"You said, 'hit the hay.'"

"Do I *look* like—that ain't—it's n' *espression.* "

Hanzo walks ahead, half-turns around, sweeps his arms out dramatically: "I have to hit *something* ."

Cole resists the urge to rub the spot, marches forward like he's relying on momentum alone to keep his feet straight. "Thank Christ y'ain't got a bow on ya."

"I have a knife."

"Well, shit."

"I have," Hanzo chuckles, *"Two* knives."

"Well, keep 'em in your pants."

"Look who is talking."

Cole grins wide at the implication, but keeps his gaze on the horizon. "Yeah. Said I was sorry 'bout that. Guess I owe you one."

"Ten."

"S'that now?

Hanzo sways, reaches for the translation, plucks it out of the sky: "'You do me one, you pay ten.' That is how I operated in the Shimada-gumi. Or," he smacks Cole's shoulder, lighter this time, the jest of boys with rough upbringings, "I could take your life."

Cole's grin grows even wider. Something about playful, violent threats makes him feel right at home. "Ten or death, huh?"

Hanzo looks around, suddenly frowning. "Yes," he says, preoccupied, "Ten or death."

"Then ten it is." Cole points with a finger-gun hand, "You're that'a way."

Hanzo scoffs, " I *know."*

Then he stops Cole in his tracks with one last wicked grin. The cowboy's lips part.

Then Hanzo walks off, waving his dismissal: "go *mosey* ."

It takes a few seconds for Cole to recover, but then he calls out, "Hey! Y'ever get that bottle cleaned up?"

"Yes, yes," Hanzo keeps walking, waves again.

"I mean it! S'a fuckin' hazard!"

"So was your breakfast," Hanzo cackles.

Cole watches him stumble into the darkness. Then he turns heel and plods in the opposite direction, hands in his pockets. Probably would've been a bad idea, going for a kiss. He's surprised he could resist the urge. But the night did teach him that Hanzo could loosen his belt, and that belt might fall altogether with a couple bottles under it. That image gives his drunken mind a little hope and a big grin.

The dorm room is hot when he enters it. Cole opens the metal slots on the window, knocks his hand idly against the wind chime, dresses down and climbs bare into bed. But even with the nightly breeze and the soothing chime, numbing exhaustion and a body full of booze, sleep resides just beyond a long valley of bad deeds and mistreatments, mistakes old and new —like most nights before.

He chases them out with images of Hanzo: how his eyes softened under those thick lashes, the upturned corners of that confident grin, his long hair black as outer space. Loose with exhaustion, touched with drink. Flushed, like he'd been after the training simulation. God help him, but if his faith in Overwatch has truly been shaken beyond repair, he'll at least harbor hope for more nights like this. Keep it small and well-tended, like a campfire in the Sonoran.

The cowboy loses himself in the mantra of sights and sounds and smells, touches himself but doesn't linger, strokes up his chest, down his soft belly, caresses the images in his mind, winds them up and lets them play until he's hypnotized himself into a long and dreamless slumber where the turquoise lights don't bother.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thewinterking for beta-ing this chapter!

First few paragraphs or so are inspired by Steinbeck's 'Cannery Row.' Fareeha is reciting a phrase from the Quran typically uttered when someone has died. Roughly it translates to: "To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return."

Thank you guys so much for your support!!!

Next up: Hanzo acclimates to his new environment and that which still plagues him.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hanzo tries to make the best of his surroundings and deals with The Cowboy.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: more alcoholism. just assume it's gonna be in every chapter lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hanzo picks up the stuffed tiger on his brother's bed while his father lowers himself to the edge. He strokes the soft white fur and pokes the black glass eyes as Genji sits up, reaches for another stuffed tiger, and hugs it to his chest. The youngest son beams at his father with glowing anticipation.

"Just a short one, papa!"

"Well," Father says, "Back when the world was new, there was once a prince without a kingdom..."

Hanzo leans in, "How come?"

"Because the Prince did not know who he was. He traveled the land talking to the wind, the fish, the flowers... Never knowing he was meant to rule them all."

Genji sighs, "I wanna talk to animals."

Hanzo places the stuffed tiger by Genji's arm and the younger brother cuddles it alongside its twin.

"Then one day," their father says, "He came upon a village beset with evil spirits. There was disorder in the streets and a constant veil of shadow. The Prince, wanting to help, took up a golden crown so that others could see him through the darkness. He led the villagers in a great battle and through his leadership, they cast out the evil spirits once and for all."

Genji clutches both tigers to his chest, "What happened next?"

"What do you think?" Father strokes Genji's hair. "The village became a kingdom, and the Prince knew who he was. But the Prince's crown did not glow as brightly in the sun. He had

to work extra hard to keep his kingdom, to make sure all could see his crown, to make sure he did not forget who he was. Only the evil spirits saw him as he truly was: a light in the dark."

"Did he ever fight the spirits again?"

"I will finish the story another time. Go to sleep, little Sparrow."

The elder Shimada kisses his youngest son's forehead, rises from the bed and turns for the door. Hanzo follows, looking back at Genji's sleeping face right before his father turns out the light.

"Are you ready, Hanzo?"

"Yes, otousan . "

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Hanzo uses a cloth steeped in vinegar to wipe the metal panels on his brother's back. A correction—the metal panels *are* his brother's back. They are as much a part of Genji as the color of his eyes, which are the same color as Hanzo's: brown in the shade, amber in the sun.

He remembers them vividly from before: gleeful and confident, alert and alive, darting the same way that Hanzo's darted when they were together behind their father's shoulder. Two young, bright, avian things. Lofty and untouchable. He remembers them from that night at Shimada castle, emerging from behind that green visor in a puff of steam, appearing like a phantom from a casket made of steel. Like an elemental straight out of one of their father's stories.

Hanzo can see them when he squeezes his own lids shut.

There are scoring and blast abrasions where Genji said he'd blocked his comrades from omnic fire during their failed mission in Russia. Hanzo replays this statement over and over in his head as he scrubs, lashing himself with the pain it brings; the life he thought he'd taken, brought back as if by divine gift, now used so carelessly, given so freely to the ones that remade him into this—

It's been four weeks since Hanzo came to Gibraltar and only now does Genji's robotic voice not make Hanzo wince: "I know what you want to say, brother."

“But I won't reconsider my commitment to Overwatch.”

“Genji,” Hanzo begins carefully, “You’ve already fulfilled whatever life debt you owe to this organization. To that doctor.”

“It’s not debt that keeps me here.”

“Then what is it? Sentiment? Do you realize what we could have, what we could *reclaim*— ”

Genji sighs, but to Hanzo, it sounds more like a growl. “Hanamura is not my home, Hanzo. Switzerland, Gibraltar, Nepal... none of these are my home.”

Hanzo inwardly steels himself for more of that damn omnic's words from his little brother’s mouth. Weeks of meaningless, circuitous spiritual psycho-babble. Words that make Hanzo stare at Genji as if his younger brother were possessed.

But what he receives instead is a combination of both. Something so essentially *Genji* that he cannot readily dismiss it.

“I’ve always chased freedom, Hanzo. Now I actually have it. *Real* freedom.”

Genji looks over his shoulder and Hanzo again confronts those shining brown eyes. Like looking in a scratched mirror. “You can have it, too. Anyone can.”

Hanzo rests his forehead on Genji's cool metal back. In the past, he would’ve put a blanket over his shoulders. He always did get cold so easily. Now he doesn’t even know if his little brother feels temperature the way he does.

And whose fault is that?

“My life has not been your life, Genji. You don’t know—”

“And I never will,” Genji interrupts, “Until you decide to share with me.”

“Share *what?* ”

“I don’t know, Hanzo. Only you would know that.”

“If I’m taking your philosophical nonsense correctly,” Hanzo says, irritation sharpening his voice, “What you’re asking is impossible. I can’t convey to you every difference between my experiences and yours, my childhood and yours. If you didn’t understand it then, you certainly won’t don’t understand it now. We are *nothing alike.”*

He leans back as Genji rises to his feet. “Then let me tell you what I *do* understand. Remember what you said to me on the comm tower, before we left for the mission? About how you felt like the break in a long chain? How that chain was once so important to you that you would have done anything to keep it strong?”

Hanzo drops his gaze. He grits his teeth and endures. He knows that he deserves every bit of venom his younger brother has lodged away in his fangs. In some ways, he would welcome

the simplicity of a proper fight, but that is not and cannot be an option. Not ever again.

Genji rests his steel fingers on Hanzo's head and whispers, "The chain was broken long before you, Hanzo."

He departs and Hanzo is alone once more, left in Genji's dorm like one of his dozens of other personal possessions: far from home and wholly out of place.

"Genji!"

Hanzo is content to come at this reconciliation slowly, sideways, and with every possible amount of forethought, but he cannot allow them to part with ill feeling. He's already made that mistake twice.

But on the way to the elevators, a foul stench overtakes him. His nostrils flare and his brow wrinkles. As he exits the dormitories, he turns and spots Genji standing on the cliffside. His glowing visor is pointed at the water.

Hanzo walks to his side and follows his gaze down.

Red-brown blooms streak the ocean for a hundred yards back, covering the surface like an oil spill. The cause of the smell is clear—dozens of dead fish bob in the powerful waves, their eyes cooking in the sun.

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Red tide, the climatologist calls it. An influx of harmful algae, ultra-rare—especially for this time of year. Mei theorizes that unnaturally warm surface temperatures coupled with the omnic naval catastrophe on the North American east coast is to blame; the Strait of Gibraltar acted as a funnel and dumped the worst of the bloom right on their shore. Everyone should guard against upper respiratory infections and try to spend as little time outdoors as possible.

"It should clear up in a few weeks," Mei says. "Hopefully."

The base becomes a ghost town overnight. No one goes out, and when they do, they travel in a hurry. Winston holes up in his lab even more than before, Dr. Ziegler rarely exits the medbay and everyone else finds things to do inside: research, repair, training. Video chat becomes the main method of holding meetings. The toxins hit Hana the hardest—her eyes are red and puffy and she forgoes socialization for video games and MEKA simulations, coming out only to restock on dried foods and soda.

Hanzo pockets a cloth steeped in eucalyptus oil (a purchase from the nearest village) and holds it over his nose whenever he has to leave the sanctity of enclosed spaces. He keeps incense burning in his room 24/7. None of it's enough; every time he walks outside, he can sense the noxious air, and it makes looking upon the base's general decrepitude even more unsettling. As if everything were rotting all at once.

One day, after waking with a groggy head (Cassidy's whiskey) and a searing sensation at the edge of his nerves (Genji's words), Hanzo throws himself into the small ritual of making tea. He heats the water in an iron kettle, warms the pot and the cup. He pauses to inhale the strong aroma of the *gyokuro*. He pours water over the leaves, counts 90 seconds, and then pours the liquid into his cup. During this process he tries to think only of making the tea, but fails to escape the habit of brooding. It's been getting harder and harder to shake ever since he came here. The ritual seems to invite errant thoughts with its mindless familiarity; like maintaining his bow, the well-worn practice is too good a time to think.

Still, he tries to enjoy the tea. The resinous incense does not conflict with the grassy flavor and he manages to find one square foot of peace under the gently spinning fan and the soft morning light. He imagines that he's back in Hanamura when his father was still alive, when spring was just beginning to show herself. Sunny urban streets and streams carrying pockets of melting ice. New grass peeking in the shade of stately pagodas. Gardeners removing the winter dressing and protection from the trees, every bulb and leaf crafted and cared for. All eager for the process of rejuvenation to take hold.

Hanzo tries to cling to the image of the white cherry blossom that grew near his bedroom window, tries to draw its fragrance from the dark trail of his memories, but the ocean's decay overrules.

He rises with a huff and goes to his dorm window. Red streaks still cover the surf and splash up the rocks with murky threat. Even the morning sky is growing into a sickly, yellowish tint, and he can hear cargo ships blasting rudely through the oceanic murmur.

Then he takes in the launch pad and the grassy patch below. Flora of all kinds has grown over the sides and in-between cracks along the edge. He knows that, if allowed to persist, they will likely widen the cracks and possibly threaten structural damage to the surrounding buildings. The base at Gibraltar is not an ideal location for a headquarters. It is subject to all kinds of erosion: the sea, the weather, the plants... now even the microscopic world seems keen on tearing it apart.

He checks his bedside clock: 0657. Genji will be meditating with the omnic, both of whom apparently find the red tide to be far less offensive than their organic peers. Hanzo doesn't even know where he could find them if he tried. They always abscond to places no human could ever follow.

Alone as ever. Stranded on a rock in the center of a broken world.

Hanzo takes a white robe, tears it up, rubs it with lemon, then wears it as a face-mask before leaving in search of tools.

Four hours later, Hanzo is bare-chested and sweating in the midday sun, driving a rake into the grass and scraping it away from the concrete. He found an auto-mower that runs in perfect geometrical patterns up and down the green, trimming along every border with a peppy buzzing noise. Hanzo imagines there are other drones to perform tasks like these, but they were probably out of commission and/or lost in storage somewhere and he isn't about to ask the ape where he can find them. Besides, the ruthless physical labor agrees with him. Makes the foul air a challenge to be overcome instead of an annoyance to be merely tolerated.

He's raking stones and pebbles off the launchpad when he catches sight of a surprised-looking Mei waving by the far edge. She wears a simple tank top, shorts, and boots suitable for hiking. A medical mask covers her face under the shadow of a conical straw hat. Over her shoulder is a beige canvas bag full of lumpy objects that Hanzo neither recognizes nor cares about.

He waves back with two curt fingers before returning to his task. He's clearly in the middle of something and knows she's too polite to interrupt him. As predicted: when he looks up again, she's gone.

Four hours later, Hanzo has cleared not only the launch pad, but all four corners of the eastern dormitories and several yards beyond in either direction. It looks like a military base should: straight lines, clean planes. Some semblance of order and civility.

By nightfall, he's ready to send the 'bots back to their base and send himself to the mess hall. Mostly he's in search of cold beer: something he has most certainly earned. It's late enough that the others will have already eaten and gone to bed, so he's in no danger of potential small talk. He's stopped actively avoiding the rest of the team, but he still appreciates every moment alone. Everything about a military base discourages meaningful solitude.

But then there's Mei. She's standing at the counters, flanked by tea and sandwiches and large bars of dark chocolate, as if she knew he was coming. She's replaced her hiking clothes with

more comfortable attire and is beckoning Hanzo with a sweet smile.

He goes stone-like at the door. But his manners dictate that he accept, so he thanks her for the meal with a deep bow, and speaks in slow Chinese: “I do not deserve your hospitality.”

She smiles and compliments him on his accent underneath her breath. Mei is certainly shy, but her enthusiasm shines through. “I had to thank you! You did so much work—I told Winston, we were watching you from the comm tower. Cassidy and Lena, too.”

Dryly: “you were watching me?”

“Only for a moment,” Mei waves her hands. “I just wanted them to see how beautiful everything is. Even better than how it used to look!”

Hanzo points his gaze at his sandwich as he lifts it to his mouth. “You have seen this base from before Overwatch was shut down?” He takes a tentative bite and then, appreciatively, four more, his mighty appetite taking over like it always does.

Mei seems satisfied. “No. I was never stationed at Gibraltar. Though I would have been happy to be. The ecology here is quite interesting. I hope to turn this base into the hub of our eco-network so we can start sharing climate change research again. Soon.”

What little information Hanzo has gleaned on Mei-Ling Zhou and her life before Gibraltar is just enough to prevent him from asking her about it. “You’re certainly flush with environmental issues here.”

“Yes, the tide… I *do* think it won’t last longer than a few weeks, but it has gotten very bad.” She rubs her pink eyelids. “Just what we needed, right?”

Hanzo decides not to let her dwell on negative subjects. “You are still enjoying the land. Did you… hike today?”

“Oh, yes. I started a bit too late—it gets so hot, you know, I really should have been more careful… but it’s hard to leave my dorm with the air like this! But Dr. Ziegler gave me a mask and I was able to hike my normal route up the eastern ridge, where the bloom isn't as bad. It's a bit sheer for climbing, but the rocks there are so beautiful.”

Hanzo raises a brow. “Rocks?”

Mei perks up. “I love rocks! It’s mostly limestone and shale, but there are tunnels where you can find all sorts of minerals and loose pieces with interesting shapes. It’s really lovely up there. I can’t wait to see it in spring! Once, I saw a couple macaques—those little golden monkeys? Which are a good sign... and I see all kinds of migratory birds. But I mostly go to collect rocks. Here, let me show you!”

Mei leaves her seat to sit beside Hanzo, scraping her stool closer to display photos from her phone. He stiffly obliges, drinking his beer and devouring his sandwiches while he dutifully listens to stories about caves and the marine fossils with which she took enthusiastic selfies; in one shot, she holds up an excavated ammonite shell with an expression of pure joy. Hanzo

has never been a collector of anything himself, but he always had an appreciation for the weapons and heirlooms he inherited, so he looks on with some understanding. There is satisfaction to be found in acquiring objects of fancy in such an unpredictable world.

And the rocks she collects are interesting shapes, he'll give her that. Nothing she's taken out of the ground fails to intrigue him. It's almost as if she senses a deeper character within each specimen—something Hanzo cannot fully fathom. Like how the laymen would look upon his family's swords and note their sheen while knowing nothing of their craft, their history.

"This one's my favorite." Mei holds her phone erect while her other hand hunts for a chocolate bar. She extends a bar to him as well. "Would you like some?"

"Thank you, but I never had a taste for sweets," he lies.

She snickers good-naturedly. "Me neither, actually. I only started really liking chocolate in Antarctica. You can only take so many types of foods out into the cold—I had a couple frozen sandwich incidents before I learned that chocolate was the best thing for sub-zero nature walks. Now I can't get enough of it! I want chocolate all the time."

Hanzo sees a shadow pass behind her pleasant smile. She continues through the photos, but says nothing. A few selfies of her with the team pop up in between images of nature—mostly Winston, but also the doctor, the omnic, Torbjörn, Lena. Even Genji. Always smiling, often laughing.

He doesn't want to sympathize with her. To sympathize would be to suggest that his experiences are equal to hers, and they are not. He doesn't deserve to compare his self-inflicted loss with her blameless misfortune. But Mei has been kind in a way that Hanzo didn't know he'd been missing, and her relentless optimism should be rewarded.

"Our paths are nothing alike," he carefully begins, "But I know... something of what it is like. Not being able to go home." He rolls his shoulder and lowers his gaze to the ground. "You are fortunate to have found renewed purpose here."

Mei doesn't look up, but nods. "Yes. You, too."

Neither of them have met eyes for more than a few seconds, but Hanzo glimpses just how close she is to tears in his peripheral vision. They part with few yet graceful words, and Hanzo takes a bar of chocolate with him to his dorm out of respect. He has no plan to allow himself candy—he must remain in top form.

The cowboy will eat it. Hanzo has yet to see Cassidy refuse anything sweet.

The next day, after another stretch of hard labor, Hanzo returns to his dorm to find an object wrapped in brown paper beside his door. Mei has brought him a rock that she describes, on a card, as a type of eroded sedimentary stone she found in one of the large caves to the

northeast. It's wider than it is tall, with curving spines of reddish-brown that whorl and twist where salt water has not destroyed. There are holes and gaps of various shapes and sizes, plus relics from the ancient seabed: minute impressions of tiny creatures preserved from time. Parts of it almost resemble wood.

Hanzo puts it on the shelf right above his tea set and wooden incense box. Then he moves it to the bottom shelf, putting the tea set higher. Then he decides it looks better entirely on its own, atop the dresser, where it catches the light from the window.

He is sitting on the bed, regarding the stone, when he feels something damp and cool touch his hand. He immediately shakes it and a small brown frog hops to the ground. It's the third one this week—refugees from the tainted surf.

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"Of course I can shoot a gun," Hanzo scoffs. "I told you that the Shimada clan dealt in firearms trade for decades. I was trained in a variety of weapons from an early age. I simply prefer the bow."

Hanzo nocks two arrows, breathes out, and hits his marks. Holograms burst into scattered pixels as others whiz by: a triple-track simulation in the shooting range. Last week he was hitting 7 out of 10. This week it's 10.

Cassidy whistles with admiration. "A renaissance man, eh?" He spins his gun before offering it handle-first to Hanzo. "Show off a lil', then."

"Using what? That outdated hand-canon?"

"This here's the best gun you'll ever put hands on," Cassidy scoffs, defensive. "Custom-made, hits like a train, got more range than an eagle with a—"

Hanzo takes the gun and Cassidy lets him, but hovers close by with his arms tightly crossed. Like a parent letting a stranger hold his firstborn.

"Primitive," the archer mutters, "The connective technology is—"

"Been staying off the grid my whole life," Cassidy interjects. "Last thing I need is a weapon someone can hack."

Hanzo opens the chamber and takes out a bullet. “Yet this is emitting a signal,” he says, eyeing the turquoise circles around the bullet’s edge, “The same as your under-sight,” he looks beneath at the twin lights, one by the barrel’s mouth and one by the cylinder, “The same as the lights on your arm—”

“Y’gonna shoot, or you gonna talk?” The cowboy takes a couple steps in the opposite direction, hands on his hips, as impatient as a big horse in a small paddock.

This is not the first time Cassidy has evaded him, but that's fine. Hanzo has accepted this cycle with the other man—training, drinking, training again—primarily because Cassidy has respected Hanzo’s reticence. Both sharpshooters are tight-lipped by nature, though Hanzo had initially found that hard to accept, given their first interaction. Cassidy’s mouth runs as fast as his gun, he is an impulsive flirt, and he has a tendency to ‘chat your ear off,’ but only on superficial subjects: fighting, arms and arms dealing, outlaw life, bounty hunting, food and nature and whatever superficial else… Hanzo shares his opinions or doesn't; they argue, they agree, they agree to disagree; but he rarely probes for more. Over the past month, they've managed to somehow create a balanced give-and-take.

Except that now, with his friend Fareeha Amari back in Egypt and with fewer team meetings to distract, Cassidy has been soliciting Hanzo’s company more and more. The archer wouldn’t mind so much if the gunslinger weren’t still so *keen* . He's handled crushes before, but somehow Hanzo figured Cassidy would've moved on by now.

Not a lot of options in a hidden base on a rock , he reminds himself.

Hanzo reassembles Peacekeeper, levels the barrel and hits four targets mid or dead-center.

Cassidy shakes his head several times, gaze dropped to the ground. From underneath the shield of his hat: “Jesus, Mary’n Joseph.”

Hanzo unloads the last two bullets before handing them and Peacekeeper back to Cassidy, not bothering to hide his proud smile. “Shall we return to the actual simulation now?”

“Keep those,” Cassidy chuckles, palming his gun like he’s making sure it’s still loyal, “Might need ‘em. If I run outta bullets or get backed into a corner, I’ll know you got an Ace up your sleeve.”

Hanzo scoffs, yet pockets the bullets in his sweatpants. “From the way you tell stories, the action starts *when* you run out of bullets.”

“Y’noticed that, huh?” Cassidy reloads.

“I am surprised you can shoot at all with a spur that close to your wrist.”

“Sometimes y’need a little *oomph* to properly pistol-whip an omnic.”

“I thought they were just a part of your ostentatious look.”

“Y’don’t like my spurs? I don’t much like your robe. What’s the point’a leaving so much skin exposed?”

“My *kyūdō-gi* allows me to make clean shots, and if I do my job well,” Hanzo looks at Cassidy as if to say, *and I always do* , “The enemy has no chance to realize my side is uncovered, nor time to make use of the opportunity.”

“Not today.” Cassidy scans Hanzo from beneath the protection of his hat. “The enemy’s sad he’s not gettin’ his usual eye-full.”

Hanzo rolls his shoulders in the tight undershirt he’d procured from a local vendor. “Not every scenario is the same.” He tests the string of his bow. “You know what it’s like. I must prepare for an attack at any moment, under any circumstance.” He draws back. “I am surprised you are alive at all, with how loud those spurs are.” A bull’s-eye.

“Don’t care much ‘bout people hearing me,” Cassidy drawls, preparing his own targets at the hover-controls. “Kinda hope they do. It’s alright getting up in peoples’ faces when they *know* you aren't scared of them, that you’re faster, your aim’s better. More liable to drop ‘em all quick if they’re up close and personal. Sometimes just the sudden sight of me’s been enough to make trigger fingers hesitate.”

“That I can believe,” mutters Hanzo.

Cassidy grins, lines up his holograms and puts down all six so fast that he briefly fools Hanzo into thinking he hadn’t used up all of his bullets, the sounds blur together so thoroughly. But there’s his empty chamber as he pushes in a new set. Endlessly cocky: “we all got our ways.”

Hanzo isn't about to show his admiration. “Do you talk at them as well? I imagine that’s a slower death, but flawlessly effective.”

“Usually just give ‘em a wink and their hearts explode.” The cowboy demonstrates with a wink-grin combo almost as fast as his shooting.

Hanzo pointedly returns his own gaze to his targets. “I am surprised they can even see your eyes from underneath all that dirt and hair.”

“People *love* this beard, Shimada. But I guess you wouldn’t understand. Probably can’t grow one this full.”

“That is true. I could not grow a beard that full. But then, I have never had the need to disguise a weak jawline.”

“Bull fuckin’ shit. F’you had the *balls* to get up close, you'd see how dead wrong y’are.”

“My eyesight is just fine. Perhaps you are getting old.”

“Ain’t as old as some, Cap'n Graybeard.”

“If my gray is so hideous, take your eyes off of me for a whole minute.”

“Every time you turn your back, I ain’t looking at you.”

“I thought we had already established that you cannot lie to me.”

“Too bad you’ll never be able to prove it.”

“If I shoot you between the eyes you’ll never --”

“Hey guys!” Lúcio is at the door. “Dinner alert. I got *paella* going in the mess hall. Who’s up for it?”

Cassidy shoots an accusatory glance at Lúcio before turning quickly back to Hanzo, who is already slinging his bow and giving the cowboy a look of general superiority. Lúcio strides off to alert others, waving his hands blamelessly. Cassidy holsters his revolver with a sigh.

“By the way,” Hanzo remembers, going into his bag. He produces the chocolate and hands it to Cassidy on their way out the door.

“Y’got me a present?”

“No. Miss Zhou was kind to me earlier and I did not want to refuse her.”

“So you’re givin’ it to me,” the cowboy grins. “That’s called 'a present.'”

“No,” Hanzo sighs, “I did not want it for myself and I did not want it wasted. Do not read into this."

Then the archer has opportunity to observe how Cassidy’s full mouth, easily his most dominant feature, makes for a very effective pout. He wonders if it’s ever gotten the cowboy out of similarly perilous situations.

Though the effect on Hanzo is one of violence; he thinks that petulant lower lip is begging for a bite.

Cassidy pockets his candy with a low *Thanks* and takes out a cigarillo. Hanzo goes for the cloth steeped in eucalyptus only to realize that it's lost its scent. He shoves it back into his pocket with a growl of frustration, at which point the cowboy wordlessly offers him a cigarillo of his very own. Hanzo reluctantly accepts; bad tobacco beats rotting sea life.

“Where do you buy these?” Hanzo mutters.

“From the village. They get 'em fresh from Tangiers.”

Hanzo lets out a smooth plume. “They’re terrible.”

“Don’t smoke ‘em for the high-quality.”

“Then why?”

Cassidy arches a brow, flashes a canine tooth. “Oral fixation."

Hanzo scoffs, handing back the cowboy’s Elvis-emblazoned zippo like he's dropping off trash.

Cassidy faces forward again with a new smirk. “I got better ones in my bunk. Havana. Had ‘em for years. Savin'em for a special occasion.”

“ Hn . That’s not all you’re smoking.”

Cassidy raises a brow at Hanzo just in time to watch him mime a joint. The gunslinger coughs and the archer chuckles.

“Ha-HA! Got a pretty sharp nose there.”

“Unfortunately,” Hanzo glances to the cliffs.

“Surprised you can even recognize shit like that. Y’party hard back at the castle, prince Shimada?”

“I am not a prince. And Genji used to partake. I was too busy.” Hanzo sniffs and re-routes, “I have observed *you* partaking less and less -- probably due to your switch to alcohol. And your increased need for mental acuity.”

“Gotta stay sharp around you, alright. You building an assassin’s profile on me? Gonna learn all my tricks ‘for you take me down?”

Hanzo gives him a knowing look and blows out another thick cloud. *Don't pretend you aren't doing the same* .

Two killers walk into the mess hall where the rest of the team is already gathered. Boiled potatoes, stewed greens and seared meats: simple, hearty. Soldiers’ fare. Hanzo rarely participates in the conversation and today is no exception. He instead busies his mind by observing Cassidy. The gunslinger is free and easy with his fellow agents: respectfully teasing with Angela, brash with Lena, goofy with Lúcio, sarcastic with Hana... But he deceives, diverts, throws smoke signals in lieu of ugly truths. He crouches behind rough humor and sly recalibration. Misdirections upon misdirections. Even his laughter -- a throaty, rapid-fire chuckle that always rolls off into a victorious little growl -- is followed by a sort of blank expression, during which he goes for a drink. Or another bite. Or a glance at Hanzo.

A man who wears his gun outside of his clothes: an easy target. Hanzo thinks of the pout again and wonders how many killers let Cassidy live out of kindness he inspired in them. He wonders if his younger self would have responded the same.

But he knows better. His younger self would’ve slaughtered Cassidy before he’d even had a chance to open his mouth.

After the meal, Hanzo thanks Lúcio, is roped into an intense conversation about the best noodles in the world (Lúcio claims Rome, Hanzo claims Hong Kong), then exits to his dorm. He showers, changes into an old black tee from OW storage and olive-drab pants with the legs tucked into his dragon-toed boots, then readies his bow. If the northeastern paths are as sheer as Mei suggests, then they should provide an adequate evening workout. A rotting shoreline wasn’t about to keep him from perfecting that which he’d dedicated his life to--

His phone vibrates on the bed. Hanzo regards it for a moment before flicking open the message.

Cassidy:

You around? Got a bottle from the locals.

Hanzo:

I thought I said you were to contact me

only in an emergency.

Cassidy:

14 year old whiskey is an emergency

if ur gonna make me drink it myself

Hanzo:

I am going to the path Mei says

runs along the northeastern ridge.

Cassidy:

I know where that is

meet u there

Hanzo rolls his eyes as he stands. He takes the gourd, but leaves the bow.

The gunslinger is waiting at the foot of the path when he arrives. He holds an unmarked bottle of deep amber in one hand, gives Hanzo a too-warm clap on the shoulder with the other. Hanzo holds out his gourd and Cassidy silently pours in half, nigh-hovering. The momentary intimacy results in Hanzo taking at least five feet between them as they make their way up the hill.

He is also reminded of dinners out with Genji -- how the Sparrow, as the youngest, would have to pour for his elders, both hands on the bottle and eyes on the cup. Sometimes he'd spill a little just for a laugh.

As Hanzo and Cole make for the ridge, Hanzo wonders why fate has decided to pave his path with silver-tongued tricksters. To teach him something, surely. But what?

Dense scrub lines the white limestone path, cuts into the edges with nettles and vines. The rapidly darkening sky turns crags and branches into jagged silhouettes. Both men drink and walk slowly as the territory is unfamiliar and the whiskey strong. Hanzo teases Cassidy, says his breath is liable to start a forest fire. Cassidy teases back, tells Hanzo to watch his step or he's liable to break an ankle. The salty wind picks up and the smell of the red tide dissipates the further northeast they go, until the archer is sighing with relief and finally loosening the muscles of his neck and shoulders. He didn't realize just how badly the membrane of his senses had been clogged with daily toxicity; like a tick in his flank, ill weather gradually draining his spirits.

Cassidy's spirits seem to bolster as well. He speaks with a cigarillo jutting from under his canine tooth. "Saw you cleaning the launch pad the other week. You really went all out."

Hanzo straightens up, prepares his defenses. "So I heard. You must be at the peak of your fighting abilities if you have so much time to waste in leering."

"I don't spend *all* day gawkin' at you, Shimada," Cassidy drawls. "I was looking over intel with Winston and Lena."

"Oh? Any new discoveries?"

"Yessir. Caught wind of a Talon signal from the Urals -- Volskaya's tryin'a start up an old mech factory so they can get a frontline defense against the Siberian omnium. Spoke to their CEO. Winston had a nice long chat this AM. We're gonna schedule another drop in a couple'a weeks, make sure they don't get jumped."

"A couple weeks?" Hanzo sneers, "Is that a joke? You prepared a whole month for your last mission and failed miserably. How do you expect --"

"Fuck off, Shimada"

Hanzo whips his head over his shoulder. Cassidy has stopped walking and now meets his eyes in the same over-confident, casually aggressive, painfully American fashion he always has; never a thought given to how his manner effects anyone else. Ready to aim and draw anytime.

"You think any of us don't know that?" The cowboy's tone is low yet deadly, laced with threat like a desert scorpion; no need to raise your voice when your tail's full of venom. "You think we're coasting through the fuckin' dark? We all know better. Things ain't gonna be like last time."

Such a temper. “Do not think,” Hanzo resumes walking, unaffected, “that because we’ve shared a few drinks that means you can speak to me like that.”

“Someone talks shit about what we’re tryin’a do here and I’ll say whatever I goddamn please.” Cassidy swigs his whiskey, follows five feet behind.

“If you wish any kind of success with this operation, you should be open to my criticisms. You should let me survey your plan before you put it into action.”

Cassidy’s tone softens: “Is that right.”

He burns hot and goes out fast. “I ran a massive criminal organization for years, before and after my father’s death. We commanded the respect of companies and governments much larger than us. None of you know how to operate as a small, unified force -- you’re a pack of flashy wolves against a wall of antlers, each thinking yourself the Alpha. You could benefit from my advice.”

Cassidy is either thinking very carefully about what he wants to say next in order to produce a desired outcome, or has been rendered speechless. Hanzo bets on the former. He has determined that the gunslinger’s openness is just another affectation, like his boots or his spurs: something he puts on to direct attention away from something else. The man underneath is more canny than he would like anyone to believe.

“Well, shit. Thought you were more inclined to stay outta all this.”

“I am. But I don’t want Genji walking into another disaster.”

“Tryin’a keep him safe.”

Hanzo hesitates, frowning at the rippling black foliage. The precipice beyond. “I have much to make up for.”

Cassidy grunts and the moment is overtaken by a cultivated silence into which both men pour their introspection.

Hanzo is a fast climber but Cassidy keeps up. The archer’s athleticism has inspired the gunslinger’s for weeks; his figure is already looking more tapered than before. Hanzo observes how Cassidy’s red plaid cuts smoothly into his jeans, broad but firm along that ridiculous belt buckle. He *is* handsome -- it’s not like that fact isn’t obvious to anyone with functioning eyes, and Cassidy certainly knows it -- but his squalor and his childish bravura undo all of nature’s good work. Hanzo thinks of Genji and the green hair, how much he’d hated it at first glance. He still can’t understand why someone would take such efforts to negatively distinguish themselves.

Some people embrace ostracism , Hanzo muses, *because they think they have no other choice.*

Flapping birds blackened by night rustle the trees above their heads and rattle Hanzo out of his rapidly darkening thoughts. All is the sound of wind: whispering leaves, whistling rocks and churning ocean. As the archer curves onto a path tunneled with overhanging vines and reaching branches, he decides to direct his thoughts outward, to the external world. He feels like he hasn't been able to sense solid ground beneath his feet in a very long time.

He takes a drink. "This is good," he gestures his gourd at Cassidy.

"Yeah?" The cowboy grins; pleased to please. "Thought it might be too sweet for you."

"You haven't told me if you've been able to procure more *nihonshu* yet."

"Working on it. Overseas shipments are hard when your address ain't supposed to exist."

"You cannot hide an international peacekeeping organization forever. What do you intend to do when the rest of the world finds out?"

"Keep on keeping on. All we can do. Winston, when he sent the recall… heh, should play it for you sometime. Guy sounded like he hadn't prepared a word of it. But he was right." Cassidy's crooked grin is taken over by some nameless shadow. "World's gearing up for bad times. Shit's too much not to do something about, no matter what anybody else says."

Hanzo eyes the cowboy from the side. "You are an odd spokesperson for an organization of heroes."

"Ain't I just?" Cassidy sends him that fanged smirk that always makes Hanzo look away. "Nothing more angelic than a reformed sinner, they say."

"I have never heard anyone say that."

"Well, now y'have. Could say the same about you."

"We are nothing alike, gunslinger."

"If you say so."

They come to a fork in the road, but Hanzo doesn't hesitate in choosing. The left path leads through the cliff and into an underground cave. He much prefers the open air and the cool evening wind, so he elects the right. Briefly, he considers finding an interesting specimen for Mei, but it's hard enough taking sure steps when the moon and stars are blocked by dense, broiling clouds. It's lucky the path is bright white, or they'd be tripping over their boots. Slow walking makes for more drinking and they've barely reached the height of the rock before Hanzo has emptied his gourd.

Staring down at their path, Hanzo muses with a slight slur: "this reminds me of a dream I had during my travels."

Cassidy is lighting another cigarillo, nursing his own slur. "What about?"

" Hn . Nevermind."

“C'mon, Shimada. You brought it up.”

“A drunken mistake. It is tedious, relaying dreams. It never means anything to the listener.”

Cassidy's words run eloquent; well-oiled. A practiced and extroverted drinker. “I happen to have what you might call an amateur’s interest in other peoples’ dreams, particularly ones cooked up on the road. Might help me figure out some’a mine. An' now you’ve gone and hyped it up by bein’ dodgy, so spill.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes. His gaze stays down as he speaks to the earth. “I dream I am walking an invisible path. *Ishi-dōrō* : stone lanterns. We have -- they have them, at Hanamura. They line the path to the shrine. They have a mechanical component that lets them hover above their base. Not very traditional, but my father liked them. In the dream, they illuminate my path, but only just so. There are too few of them and they are too far apart. I can barely move forward, with the long stretches of darkness in between. I can’t see where my feet land, nor where they are going.”

Cassidy pauses a beat. “That all?”

“I hate it.”

“Why? Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“What is the use of the lanterns if they don’t show me where I’m going? Pointless. Like a *kōan* .”

“What’s that now?”

Hanzo scratches his beard. “It’s like a Zen story, a question. Or like a joke -- something that is supposed to inspire doubt, to help the student reach an understanding of that which is beyond the capacity of words to describe. As in, ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’”

Cassidy’s canines flash around his burning cigarillo. He looks to the stars, piqued. “Huh.”

“It is supposed to provoke contemplation that leads to enlightenment.”

“Tryin’ to teach you by confusing you?”

“I could never understand it either," Hanzo waves his hand dismissively, "But I had more important things to do.”

Cassidy switches his cigarillo from one side of his mouth to the other. “Hey. I got a riddle for you.”

“A *kōan* is not a riddle, it is a --“

“I’m easy to get into,” Cassidy grins, “But hard to get out of. What am I?”

Hanzo stares at him with eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. He slowly takes another drink, forgetting that his gourd is empty.

Cassidy points his bottle at Hanzo: “trouble.”

The archer groans and walks faster.

“How ‘bout this one," Cassidy easily keeps up, swigs another drink, "How can a cowboy ride into town on Friday, stay two days, and ride out on Friday?”

“His horse’s name is Friday.”

" *Hoo-ee* . You’re too good, Shimada. Hey, this one’s funny --”

“Please stop --”

“What do you call a retired cowboy?”

“Still an idiot.”

“ De-ranged .”

Hanzo turns around and smacks Cassidy’s arm with the back of his hand. “That is not even a riddle.”

“How ‘bout this: a biker, a cowboy, and a priest are all about to be executed --“

Hanzo swats at Cassidy’s head, knocking his hat off. The gunslinger cackles, drops his cigarillo and sloshes his whiskey, but keeps going:

“-- And the judge asks ‘em all what’s their last request --“

Hanzo rushes him, tries to muffle Cassidy’s mouth while the cowboy just tries to stay on his feet. He fails, goes down hard, and Hanzo goes after, still trying to shut him up.

“-- An’ the biker says, *'mmph pgh* sex with a *mphmph!'”*

“Urusai!”

Cassidy tosses the bottle so he can shove Hanzo off, but it’s much harder than he initially assumes. He manages to twist one of his legs in between Hanzo’s and tries to yank him off by virtue of superior size, but Hanzo grapples back, trying to pin Cassidy. Now it’s just a fight that neither wants to lose.

“Fuckin’ ninja --!” Cassidy half-snarls, half-laughs, trying to sweep Hanzo’s legs.

Clouds of white dust kick up under scraping boots and scrambling knees. The cowboy tries several well-practiced moves to dismount the archer -- lock up his arms, hook around his waist, anything to get him off -- but Hanzo evades at every turn, pushes into his grasp when Cassidy doesn’t expect it, catches him off balance, reaches back with his foot to judo-hook the bigger man’s leg and get on top. It’s clumsy, but this isn’t the first time either of them have gone hand-to-hand while half a bottle under.

Once or twice, Hanzo gets distracted by the way Cassidy lingers in his clutches, or presses back when he should be pulling away, but both of them dole out blows like they don't take bruises personally.

"Getting tired, gunslinger?" Hanzo pants, trying for a choke-hold while plastered against Cassidy's back.

It's like trying to control a wild horse; Cassidy bucks and tries to twist off Hanzo's iron grip with his own powerful hands, growling -- "Not a chance."

That's when Hanzo's leg grazes up Cassidy's left side and he notices the hard ridges from underneath his shirt. Now that he's on top and trying to keep the bigger man still, he realizes through the drunken haze that what he's feeling is not natural.

"Hey, geddoff."

There's something attached to Cassidy's torso. Hanzo closes in with his thighs, tries to feel even more --

"I said get th'hell *off!"*

Cassidy bucks hard, the archer hits the ground, and something shatters. Both of them freeze.

Hanzo looks down. His ouroboros gourd, now a collection of serrated chunks, litters the white path.

"Oh, shit." Cassidy crawls closer; half-chuckling, half-despairing, "Shit, sorry, Hanzo, I --"

Hanzo swears in Japanese, grabs the pieces in both hands and hauls to his feet. "Is this *funny* to you?"

"No , Jesus," Cassidy stands up, keeps his gaze to the ground, puts his hand on his head like he expects his hat to still be there. "Said I was sorry." He slings his thumbs in his belt and chews the inside of his cheek.

Nothing about this apology is adequate. Hanzo cold-shoulders and continues up the path with fast strides, leaving a trail of white dust in the wind.

He doesn't look to see if Cassidy is following. He doesn't listen for his steps. He nearly cuts himself on the broken gourd as his fingers squeeze around the pieces. Drunken rage courses through his entire body and he hardly knows why, except that the gunslinger seems highly adept at igniting every edge of Hanzo's very last nerve.

But he doesn't get time to ruminate. Mechanical clicks, like massive switches being thrown all at once, herald dozens of light-beams across the rock. They erupt in patches from the jungle, the rocks, and the sheer cliffside: an entire array of searchlights, most of them

positioned close to the Overwatch base, scanning the overcast sky in rotating sweeps, accompanied by the rising whine of a massive siren.

Light pollution stains the once black night and pure, horrifying alarm courses through Hanzo's already quickened blood.

We're under attack.

He starts to rush down the path when he hears splitting twigs behind. He draws a hidden blade from his boot and flips it in his hand, drawing back, prepared to throw.

But Cassidy is all that emerges, panting like he's run down the hill.

"It's just a drill. It's an air raid drill."

Hanzo slowly lowers his knife. He turns and looks out, down the slope whence they came. He can just barely see the southern-most tip of the village along the shore, the outer shelf where the base resides and the wild ocean beyond. The siren drone seems to fill every curling wave and bowing branch as the searchlights rotate with lazy assurance. Illuminating every thunderhead, piercing the shadow with terrible resolve.

Cassidy comes up to his side. "Best head back."

They start walking. The cowboy lingers somewhere behind Hanzo's left shoulder, silent and shuffling -- tight-lipped as ever. The archer's heart still resides in his throat, pumping angrily under the shrill mechanical din. He can't get the image of a fire-fight out of his head. Did Winston think it was likely that they would be attacked? Who would attack them? Talon? Omnic terrorists? A foreign power?

Those who still hunt Hanzo, who would follow him to the ends of the earth?

We are not safe here. No one is safe.

"If y'need a replacement, I can order --"

"It cannot be replaced."

Cassidy falls silent. Hanzo can see the divots in his cheeks that appear whenever the man grinds his jaw. He can see the faraway scowl that reminds him so much of the celluloid cowboy he encountered in an empty theater long ago. Another intangible pretender. Another lifetime ago.

Then Cassidy says something that makes Hanzo doubt his theory that the man's openness is entirely calculated.

"Geneva was never like this. Felt like a damn paradise compared to the rat holes I used to live in, and we never prepared for an attack. No point in running drills when the whole world's got your back. Only time the war ever really touched that place was when the whole thing was blown to bits, and I wasn't there to see it. Heard about it from a damn barstool. Staying on the rock… Shit, s'like living on the edge of a --"

“A cliff.”

Hanzo glances sidelong at Cassidy just as the gunslinger nods.

"Hanamura was at the top of a hill." He searches for a cigarette, realizing that he has none. Realizing that he 'quit' right before deciding to join Genji in Gibraltar. "I could look down from the balconies and see the entire city. It was a palace -- a fortress. But vulnerable for its height. Its place on the edge. And,” Hanzo sighs through his nostrils, “Its enviable power.”

Cassidy remains silent, which is all Hanzo could've hoped for. They walk slowly in the dark, each dragging their feet down the mountain, neither very keen on returning at all.

After awhile:

“Probably gave me some of your *shirami ,"* the archer sniffs.

Cassidy starts. “My what?”

“Your head insects.”

“‘Scuse me?”

“Whatever’s living in all that hair.”

“You suggesting I got *lice?”*

“Yes, lice. Thank you.”

Cassidy lets out a dim chuckle. “Hope they eat y’alive.”

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A few days later, Genji and Hanzo join in the mess hall to create some kind of grand banquet out of their rapidly expiring food stores. The livestock meat in particular has started attracting a newly-massive population of flies brought on by the red tide and must be cooked quickly. Genji assures the team that with the right seasonings and enough rice wine, the Shimada brothers can concoct enough delicious food to last weeks -- except that neither actually knows much about cooking and arguments ensue at every turn.

As it was when they were children, when they finally decide to work together, they are an unstoppable combination; grilled beef, aromatic rice, glazed pork, sautéed vegetables and an

inspired collection of sides soon pack the fridge and freezer and, as a well-deserved reward, the brothers' lunch plates.

Genji pours Hanzo's beer as they both agree never to attempt something like this again.

The youngest Shimada examines the broken gourd over indulging in the grilled beef and fluffy white rice -- he can eat, but apparently it's not the same. Hanzo devours his share with ice cold beer, trying not to look at the earthen shards in his brother's metal fingers.

"I'll have to see about materials to repair it," says Genji.

"It doesn't matter," Hanzo mutters, "Glue isn't going to fix anything."

"Not glue, no," Genji hums, putting down the pieces between them. "How did it break?"

"I fought Cassidy."

"You fought? Why? Over what?"

"It was nothing, just..." Hanzo waves his hand, finds that he doesn't care to explain. "It wasn't serious. He just broke it. The man is as clumsy as he is -- what are you doing?"

Genji has picked up one of the pieces and is holding its inner lining close to his visor. "Doesn't smell like saké to me."

Hanzo lowers his fork and tilts his head. "So you *can* smell."

Genji visibly bristles. "Of course I can smell. What makes you think -- I still have a *nose* , Hanzo!"

"You spend all your days on the cliffs with that omnic! How can you stand the air?"

"My outward discomfort has nothing to do with my inner state."

"So *now* you're a paragon of self-discipline."

"And now *you* are not!" Genji picks up a piece of the gourd and wags it by his face. "Isn't it funny?"

Hanzo shakes his head and chews his meat like he's killing it all over again. Genji crosses his legs in his chair and rocks with gentle amusement.

"So your training with Cassidy is not spoiled, I hope."

Hanzo shrugs, not looking up from his food. "Practice with a close-quarters fighter has its competitive advantages. His style is erratic, uncontrolled -- it is useful, training alongside someone you can't predict. And he is," another shrug, "Almost as accurate as I."

“High praise! I was worried you might kill him, after that first time. On the launch pad.”

As if Hanzo has forgotten. “Can’t blame a dog for barking.”

“Ah, I think you’ve got it wrong. Cassidy’s not usually like that,” Genji chuckles. “He’s friendly, but I’ve never seen him *that* friendly.”

Hanzo looks up at Genji’s gleaming green visor with heavy suspicion. It’s not fair -- he used to be so good at reading his little brother’s expressions. Now all he has is altered body language and that auto-tuned voice. He wishes Genji would take off his visor more often, but realizes that he probably feels more comfortable wearing it. *Or* , he thinks with some bitterness, *He doesn't think I can handle the sight. He still doesn't trust me.*

“Irrelevant,” Hanzo wipes his mouth with a napkin, finally remembering his manners, “As long as he keeps his little crush to himself, I couldn’t care less.”

“Right, your type was more… well, now that I think about it,” Genji leans back, coy as ever, “You never really had a type at all. You just liked whoever father thought was good for you.”

“And you,” Hanzo gestured at Genji with a stabbed piece of medium-rare meat, “Liked whoever sat still long enough for you to land on.”

Genji laughed. “Too true. Hey -- do you remember Himari?”

“How could I forget? You probably gave some of the elders a stroke with your dancing.”

“Ehh, she was just a good dancer! You wouldn’t know.”

“I can dance, Genji. I just know better than to simulate intercourse in front of 90-year-old business partners.”

“Oh, really? Well, if this mission goes well, we’ll have a party to celebrate, and you can show everyone how well you dance.”

Hanzo scans his brother’s visor, licks the sauce from his teeth, then ruefully raises his beer in salute.

“Whatever keeps you going.”

Genji mimes his own raised glass: *"kanpai!”*

Angela fills glass tubes with various shades of luminescent red. She places each vial on the mouth of a centrifuge, turns it on, and watches as they flip horizontally with the force of the spin. Opposing force pushes the denser particles towards the bottoms of the tubes, revealing sediment. Her eyes trace the individuals until they blur together; a glowing red ring.

Behind her, Winston sits in the corner, spinning on a console chair as he surveys his holopad. “The Russian Defense Forces are running evacuations all the way into Siberia. Maybe we should help before --“

“If Talon is targeting the Ural factory, we will have to address them first. Winston, would you mind sitting still? Your spinning… *Ich han es bitzeli Chopfweh . ”*

“Huh?”

Angela injects viscous material into a petri dish. “Headache.”

“Oh, sorry,” Winston hops down from the chair altogether. He sends the images on his holopad to the wall screens, casting a celestial blue light over the entire medbay. “But don’t you think --“

"Winston, we cannot resolve all of these problems today. Let’s wait for the meeting tomorrow.”

“I just want to consider every angle. It can’t be like before.”

Angela turns off the centrifuge and lifts one of the vials up to the light. “Whether it will or won’t is out of your hands.”

Winston adjusts his glasses. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, just,” Angela glances over her shoulder with a smile and a shrug, “You should not worry so much. We will do everything we can with what we have.”

Winston scratches the back of his neck as he nods. “Guess things are easier when you can control all the variables.”

“Akkurat . It is not a science.”

Angela pours the red liquid into the petri dish and watches it fractal further and further towards the edge, curling and eddying until there is nowhere left for it to go.

“That is why we have faith.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thewinterking for beta-ing this chapter! And thank you to everyone for reading!! Your comments make my day!!!

Next up: a mission, a guitar, and a whole lotta tension.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Overwatch executes their second mission in the Ural mountains and Cole deals with the ghosts.

Chapter Notes

CH4 and CH5 will both be from Cole's POV; one "episode." I decided to split it into two chapters because I was told that a lot of people read Ao3 on their mobiles and often lose their place on super long chapters.

The plot's about to thicken and get a little darker. Thanks for sticking in there with me!

Warnings: mention of suicidal thoughts, drug mentions, blood/injuries, sexual description, violence, gunfire/battles and alcoholism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cole reaches for his gun before he tries to breathe. He makes sure it's loaded before he lays it on his chest. He lets the iron weigh down his heart until he's sure it's still beating. Then he sucks in heat, swallows grit, and coughs out the desert.

His eyes peel open to pitch-black, then close again to block the fumes. He smells diesel and tastes copper. He hears distant screaming and the grinding squeal of metal on metal. He thinks he might be dreaming, but then, no -- no, he's awake. Even his coal-black mind couldn't conjure screaming like that. Someone's hurting real bad on the other side of that darkness. He's gotta get up and help. That's who he is now. Or he's just playing hero in his nightmares.

He gets to his feet. Sparking cables and short-circuits stutter along with another sound: like a heavy crane hoisting a truck for the scrapyard. He walks a long and narrow tunnel with an uphill incline; there's too much smoke to tell much more. He feels a wet trail running down from his right eye. He knows it isn't sweat.

Then something explodes from beyond the steel wall and Cole stumbles against his gun arm. The force resounds through the black, through his bones, echoes on like a song stuck on replay. A familiar hollow breaks out in the crag of his lungs. He straightens up and holds Peacekeeper level. He climbs faster. Nowhere to go but up.

At the top is a metal door with a latch so hot it burns straight through his glove. The pain is white lightning but it doesn't matter. If he doesn't get away from the smoke, he's dead anyway. He takes the burn, rotates the mechanism and frees himself with a gasp of holy air.

He raises his gun to shield his eyes. Black smoke gives way to purifying light. The wind howls over crackling fire, pushes against him as he climbs dusty rock. The screams dwindle to faint moans of pain and panicked shouts under the saccharine warble of an ancient diner melody. Cole turns from the sun and finds himself looking down at an endless red canyon, a demolished train, and the first home he'd ever made just for himself.

Then the pain hits, and he sees the bloody shreds where his left arm used to be.

WELCOME TO DEADLOCK GORGE.

GO AWAY.

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"Y'sure you won't come with us? Seems like we're leaving the best behind."

"Unnecessary. Your party must be sized according to the needs of the mission."

"Dunno if I fancy busting into an old mech factory in the middle-of-goddamn-nowhere with only six pairs of boots and no back-up."

"Winston assures me that the RAF will be on-call should circumstances go awry, but six team members is still ideal for this objective. Too small, and you would be easily suppressed. Too large, and your risk increases."

"Yeah, I have heard a complaint or two about being *too large* in my time."

"Disgusting."

Cole laughs loud enough to startle the gulls, a rowdy *ha-HA* that flies as high as his spirits. The red tide is on its way out, repairs are nearing completion and the whole base is starting to feel new. Runny clouds pour over the cliffside, something the locals call the Levanter: powerful gusts of humid air from the east, beautiful smoke-like waterfalls smelling of Sahara. It's unusual this late in the fall but befitting the unseasonable warmth, says Mei. She expects

more weather anomalies over the next few years, but Cole can't even begin to think that far ahead. The present is way too interesting.

Across from the comm tower, Hana and Reinhardt are duking it out: *Crusader vs. MEKA* . A small yet enthusiastic crowd (with Lúcio commentating) cheers under the crash of a rocket-powered hammer and chugging automatic gunfire. It's loud and it's violent and Cole can all-too easily imagine the enormous grins on both participants' faces underneath that clashing metal.

But he can't tell who's winning; Hanzo is helping him with his weapons prep on the eastern launch pad where they first met. The only sounds that interrupt their conversation are seabird cries and crashing waves. The cowboy is nursing a steaming cup of Angela's strong coffee, the sun is skipping like a child behind fast-moving clouds, and the archer is wearing a tight black flight suit that shows off every single one of his dense curves.

It may be closer to winter than not, but Cole can't help but whistle an ancient song he's only ever heard from other people whistling it: *summertime, and the livin' is easy...*

His tune transitions into an easy drawl, "Still could use you. Lord knows you're good when things get dicey."

"You have never seen me when things are 'dicey.'" Hanzo braces the stock of a rifle against his shoulder to check the sights. "If you do your jobs well, there is no need for a seventh fighter." He sets the gun in its crate and takes up another. "Besides, you again forget that I am a criminal and a murderer in the eyes of these people. I would not belong."

Cole goes silent as he lowers his boots to solid ground. Hanzo continues his work, the stoic mastery of a lifelong fighter, steady and silent as he twists cylinders and locks magazines. Never is he more visibly sure of himself than when he has a weapon in his hands.

"I mean," Cole drawls, so good at faking nonchalance, "I ain't heard that kinda thinking from anyone. Genji forgives you. Y'all're on decent terms. That's pretty much enough for --"

" Once again , you are attempting to speak for everyone. Conflating your own nature with that of those around you."

"C'mon, Hanzo -- *we ain't that different* . We're all wanna-be heroes who sometimes get the opportunity to actually do it. We all got pasts. Hell, if they can shake my hand after the shit I've pulled, they can sure as shit shake yours."

"You are right," Hanzo rasps, tone burnt to a crisp, "We are exactly alike. Send my badge and shiny blue coat by post."

Cole frowns. "Alright, ain't no call to pitch a fit."

"I am not pitching anything."

"You're gettin' sarcastic 'cause you know I'm right."

Hanzo has yet to look up. "Is that so."

Cole casts his frustrated frown to the cliff's edge, where little yellow flowers whip in the wind but never tear. He fishes out a cigarillo with a grunt, ignites it with his zippo. "Y'outta let people make up their own minds. Stop being so uptight."

"I am not 'up-tight.'"

"Y'sure?" Cole smirks around a puff of smoke. "That suit's so tight I can see your religion."

Hanzo finally glares up. "We are wearing the same outfit."

Cole slides his tongue over his canine tooth, grinning victorious. "Yeah, don't think I hadn't noticed you noticing. I saw you checking out my ass in the storage bay."

Hanzo returns to his work. "I've considered the musculature of race horses as well."

"Yeah? You thinkin'a taking this wild mustang out for a ride?"

"You have a taste for rejection."

"Eh," Cole leans back and crosses his boots again, tapping the cigarillo to the wind, "I think I'm wearing you down."

"If you had a thought at all, it would die of loneliness."

"As your only friend, *I* might die of loneliness."

And then it happens -- one corner of Hanzo's mouth cracks upward, sudden and brief. A low chuckle is nearly disguised by the sound of the weapons crate auto-latching and rolling towards the others. Cole hides a glowing smile with his coffee mug, toasts himself the victory. The archer's laughter is always a little smug, a little abrasive (laughing *at* Cole more often than not,) but there has been a palpable shift in warmth over the past few months and it's not all the weather.

Hanzo's walls are coming down. It's only a matter of time, and Cole's got great timing.

Then Hanzo does that thing that drives him wild: he rolls back his shoulders, making his chest pop and the cords on his neck sing. The cowboy's eyes go wide right before he overshoots his coffee, spilling a little on his chest.

Hanzo pushes a cleaning rod through the barrel and smirks.

"Made you look."

Overwatch's MV-261 Orca dives through the stratosphere and into a tempest. The hail storm is so viciously cold that Cole can feel it permeate the fuselage and sink into his spine, frozen into his harness, amplifying his natural claustrophobia. He scratches the straps, scrapes his spurs on the bulkhead -- chomping at the bit.

Yellow service lights flash with mathematical regularity through the black while Lena's scratchy speakers pump some ancient, irreverent British rap: *I fly like paper, get high like planes*. It's enough to make him grin, pat Reinhardt next to him, shout about their preferred pre-arrival soundtracks over the din. The crusader's tastes don't much align with his own, but the argument keeps them warm. They both reminisce with amusement on Reyes' dramatic classical music selection and Morrison's preference for late-Johnny Cash.

He peers across the hold at Angela, who is not cheered at all. She's squeezing her eyes shut and holding on tight. Despite the unique abilities of her Valkyrie suit, the doctor hates flying. Wouldn't take a foot off the ground if she didn't have to. Cole can't remember the last time he'd been on a drop with her. Had it ever happened? His memory's a little fuzzy when it comes to Blackwatch air assaults.

Lena's chipper voice scratches over the speakers: *prepare for landing* . The Orca surges to max shields and starts vibrating with energy. Cole's brain similarly vibrates in his skull and suddenly he is reminded of every stormy drop he's ever been on, particularly the most recent one, when they'd all come home with blood on their faces and failure on their backs. He doesn't remember being so cold that time, nor so nostalgic.

He doesn't like it. It's as if his mind is taking him through the beginning to prepare him for the end.

The massive factory blocks just enough of the storm's forces for Lena to use their landing pad. A hard crunch, the lights switch from white to red, and they all rush out. Hail peppers the gangway and their dense arctic suits. Icicles instantly stick in Cole's beard and lashes. It takes Reinhardt and Winston's combined efforts to open the doors so the team can quickly and quietly pour inside, where they strip gear and switch on their shoulder lights. There isn't much to see but the swirling mixture of dust, frost, and their own adrenaline-hot breath.

The cavernous dome is larger than any Cole has ever seen, a behemoth befitting the encompassing mountain range -- it *swallows* sound, like a polar desert, and that's another thing he doesn't like. If something goes wrong, the RAF might not risk losing their pilots to rescue an unsanctioned strike team of six foreigners. And there's no one else to answer their SOS.

Lena's voice is incongruously chipper in his ear: "The power cells are offline. We're going up to the mainframe so Winston can tap in and set up the new security. Stay frosty, loves!"

She's adapted one of Jack's old lines. Cole wonders if she realizes that. He looks at Angela to confirm, but she's busy adjusting the settings on her Caduceus.

The service lights tint their breath a noxious shade of blue as they make their way through the factory. Cole checks their corners, guards their six -- makes note of just how many places there are for an ambush to hide. Between Reinhardt's clanking armor, Torbjörn's whirring devices and Winston flinging himself up rusted stairs, he figures there's no way their approach is going to go unnoticed, even with Athena's sensor scrambler. Talon might've come and gone, but his instincts tell him otherwise. No use in hijacking an enemy factory if you're not going to make use of it yourself. Or at least leave a few traps.

He closes his eyes when he thinks it might help him hear better and finds that it does. No doubt about it -- he's getting older. *That explains the nostalgia.*

Omnics line the dome's belly where their assemblage was cut short in favor of mech production. In the narrow service corridors, their stacked bodies look like corpses in a crypt, twice as cold but not half as dead. Even covered in dust and frozen over, Cole can all too easily imagine their eyes turning red and their twisted joints springing to life. He's seen it before; too many times. An omnic is never truly alive nor truly dead. They can light up from a remote signal and create a whole world of trouble in a manner of seconds.

Then he really does see red; the alarm on Torbjörn's motion sensor pings through the darkness. The engineer signals halt.

"Ahead and above. Twelve agents. They've got…"

Torbjörn tilts his head with a curious snort.

Cole raises his gun: "They got what, Torb?"

"Remote mines."

"Mines?"

"Yeah," Torbjörn is close to chuckling, "Multi-directional spinner-mines. Haven't seen these babies in an age. Called them Pulsars. *More* than outdated. They used to bring 'em in --"

Reinhardt lays a heavy hand on the engineer's shoulder. "How do we proceed, my friend?"

Torbjörn detaches a turret pack from his mechanical vest. "If I can get to the service catwalk above that level, it shouldn't be a problem. Tracer," he mutters over the comm, "We've got company, darlin'. Third level, north side. I'm goin' up to the vents, gonna target their mines'

cores before they get a chance to detonate. The team can position below to ambush their exits."

"Copy that! Winston's patching in as we speak."

Torbjörn taps off his comm and rumbles to Angela, "Make sure you monitor your scrambler's signal strength. Don't wanna pop up on their sensors."

"If they haven't heard us already," Cole mutters.

Torbjörn scoffs, "Not a chance! That hail's loud enough to drown out an opera."

Cole and Reinhardt lead the team into an engineering corridor before Torbjörn breaks off into a maintenance galley, practically a spring in his step. Another thing he doesn't like: everyone's far too comfortable. Cole wears his doubts like armor. Some of them are his own (his life's been too erratic not to drive him towards the religion of practicality,) but some of them are Reyes. His old commander's sonorous voice comes creeping back through the blue-lit fog of Cole's breath, but with Hanzo's words, a dream-like amalgam conjured by the eerie surroundings: *wear a mask on the back of your head if you want to fool the tigers.*

The corridor opens into a yawning mech assemblage. Multiple gangways surround the discarded limbs of steely giants. One of the mech, a five-man machine with a head the size of a few elephants, hangs from enormous chains in the center of the dome like a colossal marionette. Its eyes are as hard and impermeable as obsidian. *More ominous than a red dawn.*

The team is able to swiftly maneuver up one of the catwalks and position themselves below the Talon agents. Reinhardt's motion sensor shows the enemy walking up and down the upper corridor, pausing, then walking, then pausing again; no doubt laying the mines for future Volskaya personnel to stumble upon.

"Reinhardt," Angela pipes, "You are sure that picks up *natural* heat signals, right? It doesn't - -"

"Angela," Reinhardt whispers, "This is Talon. There will be no omnics."

Cole watches the disquiet swim behind Angela's pale blue eyes. She seems as gun shy as she'd been during their first mission in Russia. When had she last seen a battle field before it was only the wounded and the dead?

They scatter across the catwalk and scan the darkness. Tracer's quieted voice over the comm tells them that Winston is successfully uploading the defense protocols. The silent green ping that is Torbjörn's comm signal is creeping back to center; he should be securing his turret now, Cole thinks, high in the rafters above the enemy's level. He can't hear him and thinks that maybe Talon can't either; the hail has intensified, pounding the outer dome. Echoes as loud as distant gunfire. Perhaps his doubts were off their mark.

“Y’think they heard the transport? Or had agents lookin’ out? There’s a chance they already know we’re here.”

“If they did, they would not be laying traps,” mutters Reinhardt. “I have been fighting Talon for a long time. That is not their style.”

“I been fightin’ Talon too, Rein,” Cole retorts, “But we ain’t the only ones with --“

Angela’s cry of pain hits Cole’s ears before the gunshot. He whirls, grabs her, fires five bullets into the black and hits three agents. Her wings activate and they both sail down to the base level, hovering at the last second like a parachute catching air, gliding behind a covered mech head. She clings to the tarp with blood on her pale hands. She’s dropped her Caduceus. It lay several yards away.

“You *dare* -- from behind?!” Reinhardt’s booming voice accompanies the rocket-blast of his hammer and more Talon agents fall from the catwalk, hitting the decrepit omnics and dismembered mechs like crashing symbols. More of them open fire from the catwalk across, piercing the blue smoke with white fire and red eyes.

Angela touches her wounded side, winces: “Cole, my staff…”

“I gotcha, doc,” Cole reloads, “Sit tight.”

He edges forward, back against the mech, eye scanning the slotted bridge. Then the blue service lamps die. The glow off Reinhardt’s charge and his blazing hammer are now the only sources of light, aside from the flicker of Angela’s staff.

The crusader plants his shield against a shower of automatic gunfire. Bullets and hail and muted shouts puncture the dead factory, echoes upon echoes. Lena’s voice shouts over the comm: she and Winston are on their way.

Cole follows the line of enemy sights and fires. The Talon barrage ceases as three of their men go down, but Reinhardt’s shield has depleted. He charges, blasting through the line and straight off the bridge. They all plummet to the base level with an ear-ringing crash and something explodes in the crater.

“Reinhardt!”

Cole’s mechanical hand fans the hammer as Angela rushes out, slides along the concrete, grabs her Caduceus and soars toward the crusader in a trail of golden light. With her healing stream, he is able to crawl out.

“I’ve got them!” shouts Torbjörn over the comm.

But instead of the fizzling of a few evaporated cores, roaring detonations domino through the level like firecrackers in a tin can. The entire corridor drops, shuddering the supports and blowing off panels. Sheets of metal swing out as fast as bullets. Cole rolls for cover but a sharp edge catches his shin and he immediately swears by all that’s good and holy he’ll give up drinking forever if it means his leg hasn’t just been severed from the knee down.

He only realizes his prayer's been answered when the daze clears and the adrenaline pushes him back onto two working feet. He breathes out, and reloads.

“Mercy,” Torbjörn’s voice croaks weakly through the comm, “I need you.”

Ghostly wings ascend through the darkness as Cole puts a cigarillo between his bared teeth. Reinhardt is on one knee, glimmering like a dying torch. His rockets hum beneath a thundering timpani of hail and Talon bootsteps; the remaining agents are making tracks for a closer catwalk, hoping to get around the crusader’s recharging shield. Cole walks out from around the mech, spurs clicking and lighter flicking.

“‘Scuse me, Rein” Cole drawls.

He climbs up the big man’s armor until he’s standing with one boot on Reinhardt’s shoulder. He looks to the top of the stairs. The enemy advances, growing louder and louder.

“Mind turnin’ down the gas, partner?”

Reinhardt powers down. His flames go out just as the cigarillo in Cole’s mouth lights up. He can see his marks from their red eyes through the black. They won’t see him until his own eye turns red, but by then it’ll be too late.

The mechanical whine in his socket screams like an eagle’s cry, his chest grows hotter by a hundred degrees, and his lambent iris marks six Talon heads.

The cold ticks of an internal stopwatch mock the last seconds of their lives before Peacekeeper fills the dome with hell.

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The old Orca transport (codename ‘Moby Quick’ according to Lena) is full of buried treasure -- items the Overwatch team accumulated over the years to help pass the time during inter-continental flights: basketballs, magazines, liquor, a coffee maker, playing cards, packaged food, video games... All is familiar, but nothing Cole would call a true relic (even as he nurses a bottle of whiskey he'd hidden in a loose panel ages ago.) Jack’s books are gone. Ana’s dart board is nowhere to be seen. Gabe’s holo-folders aren’t stacked in the shelf corner, neat and labeled -- hidden in plain sight. It’s definitely a new Overwatch, even with Reinhardt still casually dunking and Angela playing the same old holovid puzzle game. Her

Caduceus patched everyone up well enough but left them feeling a bit groggy and unwilling to chat. Cole figures that the conversational hiatus will probably last until they break Mediterranean airspace.

He nurses his whiskey and imagines Hanzo here, wondering how the archer might while away the long flight. He can't see him playing basketball, but maybe. He does love a good competition. Could be that he'd stare out the window, lost in thought, or sucker the cowboy into a card game he's played since he was a boy. Cole can see him partaking in the liquor and then thinking it'd be a good idea for Cole to toss the Pachimari dolls so he could shoot them like clay pigeons. Or maybe he'd sleep, calm as an angel and twice as beautiful, his arms folded inside his *kyūdō-gi* .

More than anything, Cole wants to talk to him. Hanzo proved to be much more verbose than Cole had guessed, though it took some finessing to extract. Once he got started on a subject he was well-versed in, you could hardly shut him up. Once, Cole started bragging about fights he'd won in his youth and Hanzo spent the next hour and a half regaling him with triumphs from his *dōjō* back home, then the history of that *dōjō,* then other *dōjōs* around the world he'd visited and trained with and casually conquered. He remembers the fire in his eyes as he spoke, even the rapt attention he gave when Cole responded with tales from the Blackwatch training gym. Having that man's attention on him for that long without the implied threat of impending murder was something he'd never forget and will now always, he thinks, wish for more of.

He also wishes that Hanzo would talk more in front of people so that he could show them all what Hanzo is really like, but, for the moment, what he really wants is an objective pair of ears.

At this height, the turbulence is nonexistent and the cockpit becomes another hang-out zone. Bright orange lights gleam against unfiltered rays of sun and endless, perfect blue. Soft beeps and swooping chimes pulse with reassuring digital regularity. Lena is listening to British pop through the ship's satellite radio, snacking on a *profiterole* and doodling on the crew manifest. She offers Cole the co-pilot seat and the gunslinger obliges, tilting back in the chair and crossing his ankles on the console. The windshield panels are so expansive that you can lay back and forget you're even on a ship -- just a few birds of prey surfing the good winds.

"Now wasn't that a fine display of military acumen?" Lena chirps, licking her fingers clean. "And I've never seen Winston so happy. He was calm and collected the whole time. Like his last OW mission was yesterday!"

"So we ain't counting last month's drop?"

"Hey now -- no sense in living in the past, love. Take it from me."

Cole mouths a cigarillo that he has yet to light. The sun's getting closer to the horizon. By the time they land, the clouds will be the same orange color as the console and everyone will be too tired to talk.

"I been thinking," Cole strokes his beard. "Got a hunch I can't quite shake."

Lena sits up to make a few lateral adjustments. “What’s up, Jess?”

“You remember back in August, when we first met up? You remember me telling y’all ‘bout the Talon job on the hyper-train? How they were running Blackwatch maneuvers?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, let’s just say that lil’ scrap gave me déjà vu.”

Lena raises her brow at Cole. “Let’s just say a little more, cowboy. You think those Talon agents could've been former Blackwatch?”

“Dunno for sure. Could be Talon originals with a few Blackwatch teachers. Nothin’ they did says they recognized me, although they might’a learned that lesson back on the train. But that mine thing? Over-loading the cells so they bust high instead’a disintegrating? Shit, we did that back in Zagreb.”

“I suppose they could’ve had members come over from Blackwatch after Petras,” says Lena, scratching around her accelerator. “Lotta people from Blackwatch I never even met, let alone heard from... after. Some of them probably had nowhere else to go.”

Cole shifts in his chair with a grunt as the cockpit grows a little smaller. What Lena has left unsaid is the same ‘unsaid’ that has been in the back of everyone’s mind since the recall, a suspicion suppressed in favor of group unity and all the work needed to re-start an international task force.

That Talon infiltrated Blackwatch long before the explosion at the Swiss HQ. That Reyes was in their service, and that’s why things disintegrated between him and Morrison.

And Cole is in no position to argue. Gabriel Reyes had an eye on everything but kept his own business to himself. He could hardly tell what the man was thinking on a good day, let alone guess at the machinations he purposefully concealed. More often than not, he gave his boss the benefit of the doubt, and he thinks that none of them could never fault him for doing so. Not when their own strike commander turned many a blind eye.

“I don’t know about that,” Cole scratches his beard again, “But something’s up. They didn’t pop up on our sensors, which means they might be onto Athena’s loop-frequency pattern for the scramblers. Or they just patched in ‘cause they already know her code. Lotta shit from that drop don’t line up with your typical Talon playbook.”

Lena leans back into her chair and looks up at the same sky as Cole. “We’ve gotta stay vigilant then.”

“More’n *vigilant* -- Lena, if Blackwatch guys are running with Talon now, they got access to more shit than… didn’t Winston say that their guys tried to bust into Athena a couple months ago? Along with *Reaper?* Almost made off with the agent roster from what I heard.”

“Last spring, yeah… But Winston’s taken care a’that. Athena’s practically a fortress now, and those OWLS are a marvel. They’re real Johnny-on-the-spot when it comes to -- “

“Blackwatch wouldn’t try the same door twice. It’d be something new. Something we wouldn’t expect.”

“Yeah, but still… we’re pretty well secured, love. We’ve been working on defense for months. Winston and Lúcio’s new code is so good, they had *Volskaya* asking for it. And we’ve run more drills than I can count. I’ve been up and down that satellite so many times, I get dizzy just lookin’ at it!”

Cole chews on his cigarillo. “Sure, but some defense don’t matter none. And we gotta leave the rock eventually. What if that Talon signal from the Urals was just one big come-hither? What if they were trying to lure us out?”

Lena throws him a mixed look over the puffy sleeve of her flight jacket. Cole remembers how she used to sleep in that jacket, she was so loathe to take it off. Cole would often pop into the cockpit to chat and find her curled up in a ball at the helm, using it as a too-small blanket. He'd drape his serape over her and tease her for it later. Then she'd tease him back, saying he’d sleep in his hat if he could. He’d pull it down over his eyes and fake-snore just to make her laugh. But the joke’s run dry by now. Another relic swallowed by the Orca.

“If that’s true, there’s not a whole lot we can do but be prepared. Don’t worry so much, Jess. Look at how well this mission went! We’re really coming into our own.” Her smile is bright over the faded flag of Great Britain on her shoulder patch. “We’ll be able to meet whatever comes, you’ll see.”

Cole hums with reluctant agreement. Lena’s being too nice; a cheeky grin doesn’t mix well with a stiff upper lip. She doesn’t want to say what she really thinks: *you’re just dead wrong, cowboy* . But she’s got her own reasons for staying so cheerful all the time and Cole has no right to trifle.

Besides -- she’s right. There’s not much you can do right now. Not without intel.

“Yeah. Pro’ly right.”

“‘Course I am,” Lena reaches over to toe his long leg. “You’re gettin’ real grumpy in your old age, Mr. Scrooge. Gonna have to really get Winston on that party idea.”

Cole smiles, even chuckles some, but a party’s the last thing on his mind now.

Once they’re all on solid ground, Winston suggests they push the debriefing until tomorrow. The ship is loaded into the maintenance bay and the team is directed to get some R&R. Cole intends to follow that advice; he even excuses himself from Mei’s enticing dinner of spicy beef and noodle soup. Politely, of course -- hat tipped and smile wide.

Turbulence churns his stomach and jet lag tugs at his entire body, but as soon as he gets to his room, he’s greeted by an all-too-familiar restlessness that obliterates any chance at sleep. It

floats in like an old ghost and settles somewhere in the vicinity of his diaphragm; a foe that thinks itself a friend. Cole shrugs his brows at the mirror on the door. *Fancy meetin' you here.*

One roll of his stiff hips tells him he's in need of a shower. He strips down fast and pummels his sore parts with hard water. A couple stray moths flutter around the buzzing fluorescent lights while he scrubs hair and hide, like he's working out years' worth of dirt. The tang of iron splashes over his tongue as he turns on the jets to batter his skin, flushing his eye and the grooves in his metal arm. He soaks until he can feel it all the way in his bones, but comes no closer to easing the itch.

As he towels off over the carpet, Cole muses about the last Overwatch agent who occupied this room. He can picture the face but doesn't remember the name. Not Blackwatch -- they were always assigned to the eastern dorm. Hanzo's dorm.

That's when he remembers that Hanzo Shimada is sleeping in Gabriel Reyes's old quarters: dorm 327. View of the launch pad, tucked in the corner. Room enough for two. Cole wonders if Hanzo is dealing with the same droning ceiling fan that Gabe loved so much -- the man could never seem to fall asleep without some kind of aggressive white noise. He'd be snoring peacefully during air raids while most of the team lay shaking in their cots.

Cole considers texting Hanzo, then reconsiders: the archer values his space. And the cowboy's independent himself. Don't wanna seem too thirsty. They'll collide eventually. Only a matter of time.

So he sits naked on the edge of his bed and slicks his hand through his hair until his mind, like a well-trained dog who knows dinner is coming, plucks a memory from the dark. He flashes back to weeks ago, after a long session with Desert 04, when he saw Hanzo untie his hair for the first time. He remembers how the desaturated light struck the gold in his tattoo, how the damp black strands spilled down his flushed nape. How his shoulders pulled back in that long stretch that made his latissimus muscles strain. He remembers exactly the grainy sound that accompanied it: something between a groan and a growl. He remembers the drowsy look in those sleek, marbled brown eyes, how those thick lashes fluttered in the dark.

Cole's memory, erratic at the best of times and torturous at the worst, always comes through for him in shining style where the archer's concerned.

His back hits the sheets. His right hand slides up and down the hairy grid of his stomach.

He sees a preoccupied Hanzo brushing the feathered ends of his arrows in-between his gloved fingers, slow and delicate. He sees Hanzo nodding with a barely perceptible sway to the old guitar recordings Cole likes to play. He can *feel* Hanzo's presence when he walks beside him, small yet magnetic, fine-boned yet strong. Elegant with ancient power. As he takes himself in hand, he hears that throaty voice caught around a snicker, haughty and full of violent promise. Like thunder beyond the mesas. Like something he'd like to wake up to. Like something he'd want right up against the shell of his ear, the skin of his throat.

The window's breeze is musky with salt and sand. Cole strokes himself slow, grips the inner swell of his thigh, rubs up his abdominals and over his throat. His visualizations light up his brain like big cinematic productions: Hanzo's broad shoulders and round pectorals rising

together as he puts up his hair, obsidian-black and alluringly long. Much longer than it is even now. Kneeling at the edge of a white sheeted bed, tangerine light hitting the gleaming scales on his tattoo. Teasing the cowboy, spreading his knees. Twisting his waist and stretching his hips. Cole pictures getting a handful of both and pushing forward until Hanzo's on all fours, bending like a bow. He pictures Hanzo looking back with a wicked grin and a magmatic order: *come on. Fuck me, Cole.*

The gunslinger spits in his hand and tightens his grip and whispers the name that starts so soft on his lips and ends so conveniently on a moan: *Han-zo.*

An arid wind blows through his guts after Cole comes. He accepts it with a drawn-out sigh, cleans himself off with a few tissues from the bedside table. He’s got it bad, but it’s all good -- the kind of longing he treasures, sort've like how the open desert makes him feel: limitless and wistful all at once. Forever dreaming of whatever lay beyond the hills. The twinge of his unrequited crush is just the spice he needs in an enclosed paradise like Gibraltar.

Besides, he’s a perpetual optimist; those walls are still coming down.

He yanks on his freshest pair of jeans and looks around for a smoke. As he roots around his desk, the amber-yellow light hits the Cuban cigars, making them look rich and appetizing in their wooden box. They were the reward for his last successful bounty, some little old lady done wrong in west Florida.

Her voice scratches through the dark: *special occasions are hard to come by . Best enjoy them now.*

Concurring, Cole lights up. Then he sits back in his console chair, puts his bare feet on the windowsill and watches the nighttime's slow take-over. The rich, complex smoke slowly fills the room and settles his heart-rate to a more manageable tempo.

But the same fly comes back to bite. Irritation gnaws like the creeping claustrophobia he’d felt on the transport, strapped down and shaken like a toy in its box. Whenever this sort of restlessness took hold on the road, that was usually the moment he’d pack up and skip town. Burn his oil on midnight drives and bad decisions.

But he's not supposed to do those things now.

With a dry huff, Cole dresses again and takes to the tarmac. He’ll enjoy his cigar, walk out his energy, and if he happens to run into Hanzo on the way, well. That’s just gravy.

He’s a third of the way through his cigar when he passes Hanzo’s dormitory and spies Genji just leaving. If the path lights hadn’t caught his green vents, Cole might’ve missed him -- the cyborg walks diaphanous, as if he is never less than three inches off the ground. A far cry from the encumbered youth Cole knew way back when.

Not quite the man he wanted to see, but his next best choice. The gunslinger throws a quick thanks to whoever keeps providing him with such reliable serendipity and quickens his gait to catch up.

“Genji! How’s it hanging? Late night visit?”

Genji stops and turns. “Cassidy.” He is not wearing his visor and Cole can see his scarred brown eyes wrinkle into a knowing smile. “Hanzo is not here. I was just returning something. He and Hana went to the market and have not yet returned.”

Cole squints. “Market closed ‘while ago. How long they been gone?”

“A few hours. They should return shortly.” Genji rests his hands on his hips. “Winston told me the mission was a success. You must be very pleased.”

“Yeah, went just fine.” Cole glances over his shoulder at the dorm, then looks back at Genji. “Kinda strange, ain’t it? Him and Hana taking off for so long? Ain't never seen him hold a conversation with anyone for more’n ten minutes, let alone that lil' chatterbox.”

Genji smiles, tilts his head, and speaks with the happy irreverence of a well-practiced gossip. “Well, they are rather alike, don’t you think? Both Miss Song and my brother are combative individuals. They experience a level of focus that most people find disconcerting. And they both had a lot of responsibility thrust upon them at a very young age.”

“Huh,” Cole plucks the cigar out of his mouth. “Would’ve thought she’d pester him.”

“Not at all. Hanzo has been a leader and mentor all his life. He was always preparing to take over the clan and be a father to the next heir. It makes sense that he’d appreciate a talented young friend with a similar degree of... ruthlessness.”

“That used to be you, eh?”

Genji looks away, but his tone remains light. “Not quite. We *were* friends, when we were very young. Time made things more complicated.”

“Don’t it always. Hard for brothers to be friends sometimes, I’d guess.”

“True.” Genji looks at the empty dorm over Cole’s shoulder. “But we will always be brothers.”

Cole tilts his gaze in the same direction, then back to the cyborg. “Y’got time to chat, Genj? Got something I been tryin’a work out. Lemme bend your ear.”

Genji gestures graciously down the track and mimes bending his ear-like appendage.

The celestial unveiling is as clear as ever, despite the intense wind. Ocean-chilled gusts shoot so swiftly between buildings that Cole has to shield his cigar, yet it's not so loud that he can't hear the harmonies of the cricket ensemble or the hidden, peeping frogs. The red tide's influx of small critters has made Gibraltar feel even more like a shelter for the world's weary. More limbo than paradise.

They stop beside Torbjörn's chop shop as a momentary reprieve from the wind. Genji's green radiance colors the cigar's smoke, creating minty clouds that invigorate Cole as much as the fine Cuban leaf. The cyborg's company does leave him feeling lighter, though it wasn't always so. The Genji he remembers was even more glowering and taciturn than his older brother. Cole remembers how unsurprised he was when his fellow agent disappeared without a word. *Some things you gotta work out for yourself, by yourself.*

"If it's as you say," Genji mutters, "We may have an enemy more well-informed than us."

"T'tell you the truth," Cole braces himself with a long drag, "It'd be nice if we had our own spy ops. Blackwatch wasn't perfect but Overwatch wouldn't have worked as well as it did without it."

" Hn ," Genji grants a tentative agreement. Elusive as ever -- another shared family trait.

"You were always good at that. Recon. Tracking. Think we could wrangle a strike team, find out what's there to find out? Better than waiting for a big hit we aren't equipped to come back from."

"A two-man job with localized support may suffice." Genji's shoulder vents expel steam, adding to Cole's smoke. "But we would need intelligence to start, and that is something I would have to work with Winston on obtaining. Have you brought your suspicions to him?"

Cole almost rolls his eyes: *always the bureaucracy* . "Not yet. Was waiting on the formal debrief."

"Ah. Then I will support your intuition then."

All his comments roll back into his throat. Genji sure has changed. He's not the same rage-fueled super-ninja Cassidy used to spar with on the Blackwatch mat. No one in Blackwatch was ever afraid to bring up a subject that might offend the brass -- Reyes practically encouraged it. He knew the dirt beneath the topsoil was purer than the dust kicked up to the sun.

But after his conversation in the Orca, Cole isn't too sure of his right to dissent. "Got a feeling he might swing more towards what Lena told me -- 'don't worry, we got it all figured out.'"

"I believe that Winston is open to considering every possibility. He is a scientist first." Genji turns those sparkling brown eyes on Cole. "And if anyone is in a position to reinstate our black ops, it is you."

"Dunno 'bout that, but… this needs lookin' into."

“That is how leadership begins, Cassidy,” Genji pipes, reminiscent of both Zenyatta and Hanzo at once. “Someone sees something that needs doing and takes it upon themselves to --”

“Alright, alright,” Cole waves Genji off, “I ain’t going from bounty hunter to leader-of-men that fast.”

Cole takes another drag and scratches his beard. Across the track, the broad windows of the old tech labs are scored from wind-blown sediment. Still-lit screens and glowing service lights poke through the darkness like the stars overhead; Mei must be been working late again. The gunslinger tilts his head back and slides out a thick plume.

“May I?”

Cole raises a brow at Genji, smoke still in his mouth. “May you what?”

He points to Cole’s cigar. “I know a Cohiba when I see one.”

The gunslinger chokes on laughter. “Didn’t know you had a taste for ‘em!”

“Well,” says Genji, plucking the cigar right out of the his hand, “It reminds me of old times.”

“Angie’s not gonna like it,” Cole sing-songs.

His eyes smile again. “Angela gave me these lungs. They are mine now.”

Genji touches a button and releases the jaw mechanism, revealing his damaged mouth and mangled nose. For the first time since knowing Hanzo, Cole faces the archer’s handiwork. Watching Genji close his scarred lips around the cigar, he can’t imagine how bad that battle must’ve gotten, and how far the younger brother must’ve had to go to find forgiveness.

Of course, none of that is Cole’s business, and he knows Genji doesn’t like to talk about it.

So he resorts to jokes: “Hanzo says you used to smoke weed. That true?”

Genji expels a ball of smoke around a bright, tinny laugh. “HA! He’s one to talk.”

Cole grins. “Him, too? Said it wasn’t his thing.”

“Not weed, no.” Genji raises his brow at the cowboy and coyly changes the subject, “You two must be very close for him to be discussing his sordid past.”

“Well,” Cole’s tone shifts towards the sly, “Ain’t close enough yet. Was hoping you might help me out with that, actually.”

Genji laughs again. “You are funny, Cassidy. But I cannot help you where Hanzo is concerned.”

“C’mon, Genj… y’gotta gimme *something.”*

“Like I said, time makes things more complicated. Hanzo’s thoughts are unclear to me. You may never get a straight answer out of him. Especially,” Genji talks around the cigar, “With how you have embarrassed him already.”

“Hey, I didn’t... I’m just being honest about my --”

“Hanzo is not used to loud displays of affection. He will think you are insincere, or worse -- indiscriminate. You have to come at him sideways. A thoughtful gift, for instance! You did not guess this?” The cyborg removes the cigar in surprise. “It is a good thing I am here.”

He flashes back to when Hanzo told him that Cole should seek his council regarding their upcoming mission. As if it were ludicrous that Cole had never considered doing so in the first place.

Two yakuza princes , he thinks with some fondness.

“Well, tell me straight then. You think he could ever be into a guy like me?”

Genji looks Cole up and down with those crafty, laughing brown eyes. Hanzo’s eyes, Cole thinks, but larger -- missing that imperial aura, that sleek mysteriousness. The younger brother has no quest to rule. He does not assume authority the way Hanzo does. He’s figured out something else, something Cole can’t quite pin down.

“How would I know that?” Genji finally laughs. “You really underestimate how private Hanzo is.”

“Well, shit, then why the hell am I asking you for advice?”

“I am not sure!” Genji hands the cigar back to Cole. “I can only tell you how to knock on the door. It is his decision whether or not to open it.”

Cole replaces the cigar in his mouth and lets out an ornery note.

“You both are slippery as fuck.”

“Vigilant . It is the Shimada way. You have had men trying to kill you for a long time,” trills Genji. “Surely you can relate?”

Cole stares ahead, thinking about all the times he’s tried to convince Hanzo that they weren’t that different. Smoke flumes from his nostrils, mixes with the green light and ghosts to the tarmac, where the strong wind promptly blows it all away.

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Winston conducts an informal debriefing over breakfast but doesn't have much to tell. He's still buffering Athena's satellite imaging capabilities and consolidating the information they obtained. Through stacks of peanut butter pancakes and maple syrup, he admits that guiding Volskaya through the factory re-start is proving to be a bit more challenging than he anticipated -- more bureaucracy, more stages of approval. But he remains upbeat, confident that it'll all work out. This is what Cole gleans, anyway; the scientist has a tendency to drift off into technical jargon when he's not complimenting Lena on her cooking. It's hard for the gunslinger to keep up after only one cup of coffee.

What Winston does know for sure is that no one outside of Volskaya and the Russian government knows that their operation ever happened. The national Russian media obtained a poor-quality video of the Orca from an unnamed source (assumedly some Talon pilot's cam that found its way into their inbox), but both Moscow and Volskaya are denying any prior knowledge of the operation. The UN is not publicly interested, but Winston assumes they'll be poking around soon enough. Overwatch should be ready for any inquiries.

Cole learns from the midday simulation teams that most of the agents think it's good news, but his doubts circle back like so many repining crows. In his visible brooding, Lúcio takes notice, sidles up with more coffee and talks him into a drive to the beach. The cowboy can't decline -- not when he's this antsy. Not when the water has started looking so inviting again.

"I'm thinking the world could stand to know we're back," he tells Lúcio as they walk up the shore. "Morrison used to say that just knowing Overwatch was out there was enough to give people hope. Tell you something -- could've used that kinda reassurance when I was a kid."

"I know what you mean, man. Glad I could help out with that code and all, but I'm feeling kinda stuck. It blows, knowing I could be lighting up Providência every night instead of sticking it out here, hoping something takes off."

"It'll take off." Cole stops at the perfect spot and removes his shirt. "It'll take off and you'll be on your ass at how fast it goes. Reyes used to tell me how bad it was when he, Morrison and Amari were starting out, and that was when things were really in the shit. We got all the right stuff this time around."

"Yeah. I think so, too." Lúcio shuffles off his sandals. "Y'know, the Petras Act probably won't even matter if we do something really *big* . They can't say shit if we, like, save a million people in one afternoon."

"Y'wanna blow up overnight," Cole drawls. "Wouldn't that be nice."

“C’mon, I know you’re into it. I know you, man,” Lúcio grins. “I remember all those articles. Rushing into mad situations, bringing justice to the people.”

“Nah, that’s just the press talking. Y’stop a couple robberies and suddenly there’s a whole ongoing story about vigilantes in the streets.”

“Uh, *yeah* . And it’s cool as hell. That could be us out there. Guns a’blazin’!” Lúcio rushes towards the breaking surf, making finger-guns at the cowboy half-backwards.

"Vaya con Dios,” Cole chuckles.

His smile dwindles to the shifting sand. No one had ever asked him to be on the front lines before. Jack was the point-man. But then the dead always do leave behind a space to fill.

Seeing Lúcio sprint ahead (“pick it up, partner!”) puts Morrison firmly back into Cole’s mind. Lúcio doesn’t check the water, doesn’t stop to make sure there’s no trace of toxicity. He’s leaping into the waves and screaming about how cold it is while rushing ever deeper. He didn’t wait for tactics back in Brazil. He had no band of followers. He took a step and others built a movement around his feet.

The cowboy’s past his prime for that kind of thing. Not with near-forty-years of hard luck and an eight-digit bounty on his head. Not when it was so hard flying straight the first time around.

Then Jack's easy, mid-western tenor drifts in on the wind: *starting over's the hardest part, kid. You'll have to do it more than once before the end.*

The last time Cole saw the strike commander on this beach was at the tail-end of a brutal summer. He was pushing and pulling Gabe towards the water and Gabe was putting up a fight just to tease him. Jack was so easy to get a rise out of -- the kind of straightforward country spirit that endeared him to people. Gabe was the complete opposite: guarded, complex, savvy to the point of cynicism. He was always finding new ways of getting under Jack’s skin and Jack always let him. Two sides of the same coin. Partners in every sense of the word.

And Ana was there, effortlessly stunning in her bright cobalt swimsuit. Black hair whipping in the salty breeze, bronze skin slicked with delicious-smelling sunscreen. Cole shakes his head at the memory, blinking hard against the midday sun. The last time they were all out there together, she caught him gawking and started musing about the seagulls as a distraction. Always the sharpest eye. And the kindest heart.

Lúcio cries from the waves, “C’mon, Cass!”

But Cole’s not on this beach. He’s on another like it, only with different people, different birds -- different individual grains of sand. He waves to Lúcio as he lowers himself to the shifting ground with a grunt. Every joint feels like a dense weight as the beach morphs around his broad body, warm and grounding and whole. It pulls and supports him at the same time. Bakes him from above and underneath. That old rush of restlessness sweeps over his nerves like a cold rising tide and he sinks even deeper.

The wind caresses but does not stay. Waves crash, one over the other, living and dying in a soft, circular drone. The crying swifts sway at the same rhythm, still lingering from summer, content to stay while the weather keeps but as sure to move on as the sun is to set. The earth drifts through space and when Cole breathes out, it seems like the whole thing is a part of him and he's the one spinning through an endless void, sticking close to the sun because, why not? Where else is there to go?

He isn't ready to charge forward with the Overwatch flag over his shoulder, but he isn't ready to hit the road yet, either. *Just a few more weeks,* he tells himself. Something will break by then; a reason to stay or a reason to go.

The beach pours between his fingers as he gathers two fistfuls of sand: one in flesh, the other in steel.

Sunned and salted, Cole and Lúcio head back to base. They spy Lena and Mei in the other truck and immediately hold a race, which Cole wins, which Lena claims is only because they're driving on the wrong side of the road and that Cole drives like a maniac.

They rendezvous at the garage, where the sun pierces the slotted hangar doors, creating a hot cave of gas and oil. Cole loves the smell. He's picturing his old black hog alongside the sleek Overwatch hoverbikes when he spots Lena unloading a huge case of beer.

"Damn, Lena," he drawls. "You got clearance for that party, I'm guessing."

"Sure did! Twenty-nine-hundred, in the mess hall. Might make a fire on the hangar if Rein can find an extra turbine cylinder."

"Gonna make a bonfire in an engine casing?"

"Isn't it genius?" Lena motions to the rest of the stuff with her head. "C'mon, cowboy. Put those big arms to good use."

Cole hauls two crates full of provisions to the mess hall but elects not to stick around for the prep. He makes some excuse and returns to his dorm to find dry clothes. He whisks the sand out of his hair and switches on some old Western while he fries up some eggs with runny salsa and hot sauce. He eats them in a tortilla as he watches seven cowboys save a town from a roaming gang. He watches the ending from the bathroom as he trims his beard. He straightens his blankets and masturbates again. He rolls a joint and smokes it in a patch of sun, humming the movie's rowdy theme song to the braying gulls. He looks out at the ocean and thinks about dreams he's had. He thinks about prayers he's made.

But that restlessness still threatens from his mirror on the door. Every time he meets his own eyes it's another dart in his stomach. Should he even bring up Blackwatch to the team? Was he just making trouble where there was none? Could those Talon maneuvers at Volskaya have been a coincidence?

And where the *fuck* is Hanzo?

He grabs his hat and his serape and heads out for the northeastern path he took with the archer. Seems like a year since he broke that gourd. As he meets his reflection in the door's mirror on his way out, he wonders if Hanzo's still sore about it.

Cole reaches that fork in the road between the cave and the cliff when the sky's just turned from blue to bittersweet. He takes the Cuban cigar, now smoked to a stub, and tosses it to the limestone. Heatwaves roast him through his serape, informing his decision somewhat; while the cliff path leads up to an ancient cable car railing and a stunning view, the cave will be cooler. That, and he's never been inside before. Didn't have much time for long hikes back in the day -- not when the beach was a closer, more sociable option. He knows the caves at sea-level quite well (he's taken more than one willing agent under those sapphire falls,) but the high-altitude caves are a frontier all their own. And it's been awhile since he went spelunking.

"Geronimo," he mutters, and walks into the dark.

The cowboy does not like small, enclosed places. A relative he no longer remembers once told him that most people in their family lean on the shorter side. The only reason Cole'd grown so tall is because he'd never spent more than ten minutes indoors from infancy to adolescence. Or, as this person suggested, it was because his long-lost daddy was a highlander. It was the kind of backhanded endearment you'd find in certain strains of Southerners, yet there was a truth to it that stuck out in Cole's mind, enough for it to come back to him here, in the dark corners of an ancient cave on the other side of the world.

But it's not so bad. It's bigger than he expected, with high ceilings covered in massive stalactites and broad pockets worn out by eons of dripping water. There's a mystical beauty to the melted columns and sloped fissures. The air is cool and has an untouched smell, crisp and clean as the water that gathers in glassy pools off the path. It feels a little alien, but then Cole realizes, the most alien thing in here is himself -- this place has been around long before people. He took his time climbing, so he doesn't have enough patience to explore every branching path, but he can already tell that the space goes on for miles; maybe the only bit of true wilderness left on the rock.

Then he comes to an open cavern that looks eerily close to a cathedral, with organ pipes and pulpits and breadth enough for a Sunday congregation. It feels like the old lamp-lit Catholic missions he was dragged to as a kid in Santa Fe: red and stultifying, mass dragging on for hours, always more hell than heaven.

He takes off his hat and touches it to his chest. *Mi barrio* .

The restlessness makes way for its old friend loneliness. They always come like this -- circling each other in a haunted *do-si-do* , usually at the moment right before sleeping or after waking. He tries to push it off, but the surrounding stone boxes him in like a priest's confessional, echoes back whatever he shoves away. He tries to think of that old relative, who they were, what else they might have taught him, but he's grasping at dust. The only teachers Cole remembers now take up all available space in his mind, like a vaporous holy trinity filling the empty sanctum: the father, the son, and the holy ghost.

But it's all worth it when Cole catches a flash of sunlight through one of the narrower corridors. He braves the claustrophobia just long enough to find a wind-filled chamber against the eastern shelf. His breath catches to see a huge opening in the cliff and the furiously beautiful horizon beyond, unblemished by freighters, mountains or even birds. If it were dark enough, he could probably spot Winston's drone orbiting through the troposphere.

There's space enough for a mech to fit through and when Cole kneels to touch the grass he finds it soft and cool. Ferns and other low-light plants sway in the breeze like they've been content for millions of years. Wind blows warm through his hair and god damn it if it isn't the best spot he's found on the rock yet. With a twinge of pain, like the dying cry of his loneliness, he wishes he could show it to Hanzo.

It's official: he really misses him. His wit, his eyes. His appreciation for the natural world, his unique vision -- always surprising, always ethereal. Again, unbidden but predictable, that old folk song drifts in on the salty breeze: *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*

Cole tries to track the star along its fade-line and feels a strain behind his right eye. With a dig of his calloused fingers he can feel the resistance of the orb in its socket, but he can't tell if there's something wrong. Best leave it be. He'll let Angela look at it later.

Eye troubles , Ana said once. *You'll start getting them, too. When your eye is that good it can start to hurt after a while. Like staring at the sun for too long. Did you know that ancient peoples used to worship the sun? You think you can stare at God and not feel pain?*

Cole would never have Ana's eye. Hers was the best. But his own is pretty damn good, and it works well enough for him. He has no idea how, but it does.

He steps to the precipice and looks all the way down. It's a good drop, enough to turn most stomachs, but the cowboy just spits. He's never been afraid of heights, nor of dying. He's rushed headlong into more bad scenes than the rest of the team combined. It isn't that he has a death wish -- more that he should be dead already and so doubts Death's chances. There've been many opportunities: should've died as a foster kid during the attacks, should've died on a speed run with Deadlock maniacs, should've died in Blackwatch a hundred times over. Now he keeps death on his arm and doesn't for one second forget it.

He sits on the edge, hums that old folk song, grins around his last cigarette and watches the sun set. Why not? Where else is there to go?

Chapter End Notes

The song Cole whistles at the beginning. The rap Lena plays in the Orca. The Western movie's theme song Cole hums.

As always, thank you so much for reading!

Up next: A party and then a "party."

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Overwatch throws a party, but Cole can't seem to get fully into the fun.

Chapter Notes

Continued from previous chapter!

Warnings: alcoholism, mention of suicidal thoughts, drug mentions, blood/injuries, sexual description, some violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the daylight disappears along with his cigarettes, Cole heads back to base. He considers changing for the party, but his desire for food outweighs his desire to smell less like a beach. Never felt the need to dress up for anything -- no point in starting now.

He rubs a lazy hand over his growling stomach and finds that his sun-bleached, button-up shirt is creeping out of his jeans. He picks at the loose fabric and clicks his tongue. It's been a hard road, but he's finally noticing a difference in his waistline after training for over a month with --

"Good evening."

Cole, not a man who flinches lightly, starts so hard that his spurs probably spark on the tarmac. Hanzo merges onto the path beside him as if he'd materialized there, looking bemused and amused. He's wearing dark jeans and a beautiful, black-and-white, satin bomber jacket. All rich color and shiny silk. Cole slows down a half-step to check out the archer's back, and sure enough, there's an elaborate scene embroidered from collar to hem: cranes and tigers and Chinese foliage. Hanzo scoffs as Cole circles and whistles, low and soft, daring to ghost his hand across the archer's shoulder as if brushing nonexistent dust. Hanzo's usually messy topknot has been smoothed into a more traditional style, the golden sash gleaming under the path lights like a royal banderole. Has he spent all this time getting that dolled up? Did he always have hair that long? Has he somehow gotten even *more* handsome since Cole last saw him?

"Hey now," the cowboy scoff-laughs, utterly caught off-guard: "You look --" Good enough to eat, "-- Real nice, Mr. Shimada."

Hanzo slips his hands into his jacket pockets and gives Cole a few seconds' worth of a peacock's smile. "I purchased some items. I was unloading them in my room."

Cole thinks back to Genji's advice: *a thoughtful gift*. On what planet could Cole Cassidy afford to buy something that would turn Hanzo Shimada's head?

Somewhere in his belly, deep enough that he hardly recognizes the spot, an old resentment for the blithely rich bubbles up like a dormant geyser. "Didn't know you could buy clothes like that at the market."

"We went to Lisbon." Hanzo slips his quick fingers into Cole's shirt pocket to snag his smokes.

Cole looks like Hanzo just snagged the air right out of his lungs. "Lisbon? You drove all the way to Lisbon?"

"We decided that we needed the excursion. And Hana had never been to Portugal."

Cole grunts as he slings his thumbs in his pockets. Hanzo, disappointed to find no cigarettes, leaves the empty pack in his jacket pocket.

Crisp as the wind that blows: "is something wrong?"

The cowboy grunts. "Didn't know 'excursions' were on the list of things Hanzo Shimada is up for."

"This base can feel a bit confining, after a time." Hanzo tilts his head. "Are you jealous?"

"Well, fuck -- *yeah*. I wanna go on a trip with you."

The archer looks away with a snicker, laughing at Cole. He's in a remarkably good mood, something that makes the cowboy bite his cheek. With all his accumulated agitation from the past couple days, he's liable to say something he'll regret.

"We have gone to Desert 04 many times."

"Somewhere real," Cole snaps, his accent growing thicker. "I ain't playing around."

Hanzo arches a brow at him, then looks straight ahead. "I was not aware we were playing anything."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. And I ain't…" He feels his temper light up and does a piss-poor job of stamping it back down. "I'm not trying to start something here."

"It certainly seems like you are."

"Forget it then."

"Done." Hanzo's tone is cold enough to put out his fire.

They walk in silence to the mess hall, where the atmosphere couldn't be more different: hangar doors open to the grass-lined lot, a square patch of concrete about a hundred yards from the cliff's edge. Two wooden benches sit just close enough to the faded concrete for diners to catch the salty breeze. Lúcio has stewed something *spicy:* rich notes of smoked fish, roasted plantains and freshest lime fill Cole's nostrils and stir his stomach. Multi-colored peppers blacken on a spit next to a huge fire which, as Lena suggested, dances within the shaved-down casing of an engine cylinder. Both she and Reinhardt are well on their way to being drunk and doing their damnedest to make sure everyone else comes along for the ride. Lúcio is explaining his recipe to Winston, who is cutting up local sweet breads. Angela is chatting with Torbjörn, who is constructing an assembly line of s'mores ingredients. Hana, sitting on a table, plays what sounds like a soft-electronic version of 'No Woman No Cry' through Lúcio's old speakers.

It's the exact kind of seaside scenario that Cole always loved about Gibraltar; build a fire, find a drink, hand someone a ukulele and suddenly paradise is all around. The s'mores are a newer, stranger kind of touch, but it's a newer, stranger kind of team.

Hanzo gives Cole a look, something like an inside joke, and it almost erases their spat: an intimation of feeling out of place. The cowboy throws back a weak smile before the archer heads towards two giant coolers, where Genji—beer in hand—is enthusiastically waving him over.

So Cole heads straight to Hana. "Hey, soldier. Went on a lil' shopping trip, huh?"

Hana, cross-legged in glittery bicycle shorts and an oversized sweater, leans back on her hands and grins. Her white baseball cap sports a fluffy pink bunny patch, as if someone made it just for her. "We *so* did. We were just gonna grab some beer for the old man, but I actually ran into some fans at the market and they told us about this music festival in Lisbon! I didn't even ask Hanzo—he just put the stuff in the car and said," Hana attempts a very rough impression of Hanzo's scratchy rumble, "'The beer will keep.'" She breaks into bubbling laughter, bopping Cole's side. *"Michyeosseo!* He's the best."

"Yeah," Cole drawls, watching Zenyatta hover curiously near a box of old fireworks. "Sure is."

"We had a great time. I talked him into shopping afterwards and he bought me this," Hana tips her cap to Cole the way a cowboy might. "Isn't it cute?"

"Sure is."

"Wish you could've been there! Hey, would you grab me a beer? This playlist needs work."

"Sure can," Cole grunts, returning with heavy feet to the beer cooler, where Lúcio is grabbing one for himself.

He promptly raises his brow at the cowboy. "'Ey, Cole. What's with the face?"

Cole uncaps a bottle on his belt buckle, takes a deep swig, then slowly points a finger at Lúcio. "Not quite sure. Ask me again later."

Lúcio raises a brow over his huge grin. “Dude, I am *not* gonna remember that. But show me that belt thing!”

“I’ve got it, everyone!”

Mei emerges from the darkness, wearing a white sundress and waving two long acid test sticks. Her yellow rain boots are covered in seaweed. “The water’s clearing up. The red tide is almost gone!”

The team erupts in a sporadic wave of raised hands and raised cheers. Reinhardt sloshes his beer stein, the same one he’s had since Cole first met him, spilling amber froth onto Torbjörn’s boots. Lena adopts a huge bag of marshmallows and tosses a handful in the air. Mei skirts the attention, pink in the cheeks, and slips to the side where Cole waves her over.

“Ey, well done, darlin’,” he taps his beer against Mei’s acid sticks.

She giggles at the gesture. “Oh, I didn’t do anything. Just checked the PH.”

“You been keeping an eye on that mess for weeks. Would’ve all been going nuts without you.”

“Well,” she beams, “It is my job."

Out of the corner of his eye, Cole can see Lena winding up marshmallows like a pitcher on the mound. She takes aim at Torbjörn, who wags his clawed hand at her.

“Well, here's hoping your job gets easier. Seems like the whole planet’s taking a hit.”

“Yes, it is,” Mei sighs, looking out at the cliff. The sunset outdoes herself -- mountainous magenta clouds and heavenly beams of pale tangerine creating long shadows and sharp hues. The swaying grass kisses the edge of the concrete, both bathed in rose. Crashing waves drone on like meditative breaths.

“You know, it's funny," she says, her gaze distant, "Gibraltar was never a focus for the environmental units. Orbital-launch facilities only. Every other Watchpoint was outfitted with at least *some* research equipment and tools to relay information with other eco-points. But it is so mild here... no one ever thought about it, I guess.”

Cole swigs his beer and casts his gaze over to Lena, who is aiming a marshmallow at Genji. The cyborg takes a stance and palms the handle of his sword. He gives her the same *bring-it-on* gesture that Hanzo once flung at Cole. The older brother is wryly sipping his beer nearby. His eyes briefly catch Cole’s before turning back to his brother.

The cowboy lifts his own beer to his lips. “Guess that's sometimes the case -- no one noticing shit 'til something's gone wrong."

Hanzo’s deadpan call of, "That is not what a *katana* is for," goes ignored as Lena pelts Genji with marshmallows. He deflects them all until one gets stuck on the edge of his blade, at which point he removes his visor and takes a bite.

"COLE!" Hana leans over her holopad. "I said get me a BEER!"

One bowl of *moqueca* and two drinks later, Cole Cassidy loses all irritation to the cool night-wind. Lúcio took over the music, using a mobile DJ deck that fits on his lap, mixing samples cyber-connected gloves. Light trails spin from his fingertips, mix together, create dazzling patterns under his contented smile. Winston watches with quiet curiosity, sipping a local sweet soda straight from the bottle. Hana and Mei are nearby, giggling over Hana's impersonations. Genji, carrying three sticks' worth of half-burnt marshmallows, catches the tail-end of Hana's impression of him -- she plays innocent, coyly grins. The cyborg passes one stick to Mei, then offers one to Hana; she reaches for it and Genji pushes the gooey mess right in her face.

Cole is smoking cigars with Torbjörn, arguing about national beer differences. They sit at the cliff-side of the bonfire circle, a makeshift corner carved out by four fold-up chairs and one of the the coolers; Torbjörn claimed it after deciding that no one else understood proper cooler etiquette.

"Watch out, Rein," Cole snickers as Reinhardt goes for a beer, "Torb's got a *system . "*

"You take one bottle from the top and put new ones in at the bottom! What's so hard to understand?" Torbjörn snorts, smiling behind his bristles.

Lúcio takes a break from the music to chat with Lena by the fire. Not a minute passes before they're both laughing, Lúcio hanging off her shoulder.

"You are all drinking too much anyway," says Angela, drifting close to Torbjörn's shoulder. "Tomorrow you will be cleaning off this launch pad in the hot sun."

"S'that so?" The cowboy takes another swig.

Angela gestures to Cole, toying with a grin, "And yours will be the worst." She moves to sit down, bumping insistently against the barrier of Cole's long legs.

"Sorry, Angie, but this here's the big dick corner," Cole drawls, crossing his boots on the cooler while she looks on in horror. "And I don't mean metaphorical, else I'd offer you a seat."

From out of nowhere, Genji lets out a small "Oh," and glides into the seat beside Cole. He leans back and crosses his legs. Cole wordlessly passes him a beer. Then he looks up at Angela's dropped jaw and laughs so hard he almost kicks over the cooler. Torbjörn laughs too, his chair teetering on the edge of collapsing altogether.

"You all..." she laughs, covering her eyes. "How barbaric."

"What is that old German drinking song, Angela," Reinhardt eases himself down into the spot beside Genji. "The one with all the geese?"

“Oh,” Angela giggles again -- a lightweight, teetering in her short heels. “It goes… ahh…” She starts a rowdy drinking song, waving her Overwatch coffee mug like a flagon.

Reinhardt’s booming base takes over the doctor’s delicate warble twice over and Cole rolls his eyes over a twitch of déjà vu. He remembers past parties with the big crusader -- always hamming it up, trying to impress Ana and her quick shutter. The sniper was never at an event without her camera; most of the photos that graced Winston’s lab and the Orca were her own. Cole even had a few in his bunk, dented from spending so many years in his wallet. While everyone was busy losing their minds over some hysterical happening, she'd be capturing it for posterity. Half the hijinks Cole pulled at get-togethers were just to lure her attention. He’s got the scars to prove it.

Then his attention flies to the side -- Hanzo's golden scarf catching the firelight. He’s talking with Mei near the cliff. Though his arms are tightly folded, he nods with concern as Mei speaks with animated gestures. Cole watches him scratch his beard, shrug with his brows, and then cast his heavy-lidded gaze Cole’s way.

The cowboy turns his eyes before he's caught. “Hey now,” he drawls when Reinhardt starts up a new German song. “Sing one we all know, y'big sunovabitch.”

“There is no need to feel bad for not knowing these songs, Cole,” says Reinhardt, brushing back his lion’s mane. “You were not present at the siege of Vienna. We sang those songs to omnic fire from dusk to dawn!”

“Yeah, ‘cause I was sitting out an incursion in Slovenia with Reyes. We didn’t get outta there for two days. All we did was play cards and talk about you guys.”

Reinhardt looks down at his beer, twitches his thumb against the lip and takes a long draw. Tension blossoms around the gunslinger's chest until the big man lets out a deep sigh of satisfaction, points to the sky and says, “What about *Helan går?* We all know that one.” He smiles at Cole.

Torbjörn sits up in his chair. *“Ja! JA!”*

“Rein, no one knows *Helan går,”* Angela laughs. “We’ve all just made nonsense noises for years!”

“That’s half the fun, love.” Lena leans over Rein’s shoulder and raises her bottle. “Drinks at the ready!”

Lúcio break-dances to everyone’s bad singing, much to their delight, but Cole can’t seem to drag his eyes away from Reinhardt. He waits for another sign, some expression he can pull meaning from, but the crusader is immersed in the raucous song. The cowboy looks down at the lager in his hands. He thinks of Ana and her camera again. If she were here, what kind of scene would she capture now?

Then he thinks of the road, but pushes that away before it stretches out too far.

The song finishes and Zenyatta, drifting by the grass, claps with all four pairs of hands. Hana, laughing hard enough for soda to come out her nose, clutches Cole's shirt sleeve to steady herself, jerking him back into the present. "What was that?! That was terrible -- I *loved* it! Do another one!"

Two songs (all German) and three drinking games (all lost) jerk Cole from a moody low to a nearly manic high. He feels like he could walk off the edge of the cliff, step onto the wind and saunter all the way to Morocco. If he squints his eyes, he can almost imagine that he's back in the old days. The players are a bit different but the game feels the same. Lena and Lúcio keep leaping over the bonfire, each jump more elaborate than the last, like a hot game of Horse. Genji and Zenyatta sit nearby, rating the jumps, Zenyatta forming Genji's judgments on a scale of one-to-ten with his glowing yellow orbs; except he keeps giving them both tens no matter what, much to Genji's delighted exasperation. Reinhardt and Torbjörn are speaking in German about something apparently hilarious and gesturing wildly enough to spill most of their drinks.

Cole doesn't spill. He drinks no faster than usual, but he doesn't stop, either. With the soreness building behind his eye and unfortunate memories vying for his attention, there's no question of afflicting himself with something he can control. There was a reason Overwatch threw impromptu parties; some people are more in need of distraction than others. The more difficult the mission, the more raucous the celebration afterward.

He's drifting out of a three-way conversation with Angela and Winston when he hears Hanzo's sharp, *loud* laughter from beyond the bonfire. He spies the other cooler beneath the archer's boot, having mysteriously appeared under the Shimada brothers' dominion. He sees Hanzo, all vicious grins and aggressive gestures, talking in very fast Japanese to Genji, who gives back as good as he gets with a lot of grinning eye-rolls and drawn-out vowels. They almost seem like they're fighting and have garnered a few alarmed glances, but Cole thinks they look like how he and Gabe must've looked whenever they'd speak Spanish at parties. Sometimes the discussion would get heated and it must've seemed intense, but they'd never outright fought. Cole was too mutable to ever really butt heads with Gabriel Reyes. *You mess with the bull, you get the horns.*

Inexplicably, Cole thinks of Fareeha and wonders how she's doing. He hopes she's having fun with her team at Helix, or some other close friends. Maybe enjoying a nice evening with her dad. Not working too hard. Not thinking about the past, like he is.

"Hey, Angie," Cole drawls, sitting next to the doctor, "What time is it in Cairo?"

"It's an hour ahead! Do you want to call Fareeha? You know she is probably asleep if she is not on a mission. We should not wake her."

"Ahhh, you're right. I'll send her the photos later." Cole chuckles, slinging his arm over the doctor's shoulders. "Y're such a *doctor,* Ange."

“And you are *drunk ,* Cole,” Angela laughs.

“Getting there.”

“I think that should be your last beer, or you will miss tomorrow’s meeting.”

“Sorry, Ange, but Dr. J. Daniels is my primary.” Cole looks out at the scattered team and flickering fire. “Hey, Angie.”

“Yes, Cole?”

“Y’ever wonder why it’s just us?”

The doctor holds up her mug of apricot schnapps with both hands. “What do you mean?”

“Us. The team. We all got recruited ‘round the same time,” Cole muses, leaning his head on her head. “Y’think that’s why we’re the only ones who answered the recall?”

“You are too heavy for this!” She pushes him off and Cole sways like a teetering pine. “That could have something to do with it. I cannot be sure.”

The cowboy scratches his beard. “Hey, Angie.”

“Yes, Cole?”

“Think something might be wrong with my eye.”

“Oh, dear.” Angela leans over, peers owlishly into Cole’s socket, then leans back and sips her drink. “I can’t see anything obvious right now. I will examine it properly tomorrow, *ja?"*

“Ja.” Cole sniffs. “Hey, Angie.”

Angela snickers. *“Yes* , Cole?”

One side of Cole’s mouth grins high over his canine tooth. He raises a wicked brow and purses his lips around the word: “polka.”

“Exgüüsi? What... *Cole --!”*

The doctor is whisked up and twirled into the cowboy’s arms. He definitely doesn’t know how to polka and Lúcio is definitely not playing Swiss folk music, but he can fake it with the best of them. Angela laughs, catches his waist and tries to lead him in an improvised waltz, giggling out tips for Cole to ignore. It’s reminiscent of the way he grabbed and whirled her away from Talon fire in the mech factory -- he can even hear the shooting, smell the ice and acid. His right eye throbs, but still they spin.

And their romping display is enough to convince others to join in. Lúcio whoops with glee, drops the beat and picks up the tempo. Half the team don’t know what they’re doing and have a great time doing it. Some of them are just adept enough to keep from falling into the fire. Some are content to just watch, toast, and laugh at the spectacle. Hana tosses old sparklers

from many holidays past into the fire, making it flare and pop as she spins around with one in each hand; independent of all, a tiny shooting star.

“Look, up in the sky!” Cole cries out with an old familiar cadence.

Angela wails, “What now?”

“It’s a bird!” Lena shouts, twirling with Mei, “It’s a plane!”

Cole lifts Angela by her waist, “No, it’s a goddamn angel!”

Angela spreads her arms like wings as Cole spins, blushing ear to ear but grinning like a fool. It only lasts a few seconds before she paps Cole’s shoulder, “Put me down!” and is gracefully transferred to Genji -- easily the best dancer of the bunch.

Then Cole is caught and spun around by a chattering Lena. Even three sheets to the wind, she dances faster than he can keep up with; after a few manic turns, she releases him to the sidelines. Cole offers his hand to a seated Reinhardt who, chuckling, declines.

Then the cowboy turns away, pouts heavily, clutches his faux-broken-heart and crashes directly into Hanzo.

And the archer draws him in. He smells like lager and the plain soap they all use and sweat, the same sweat Cole is painfully familiar with from their many training sessions at Desert 04. Hanzo was grinning before they collided, but he’s not anymore. Neither is Cole. Hanzo takes his waist and they turn together. Cole’s breath stops. They’re so close. They move like water. The fire blazes against one side of Hanzo’s face and shifts like the changing of the moon. Cole lifts his natural hand to clutch his arm. Hanzo closes his eyes, drops his hips by a single increment and Cole just about loses his goddamn mind.

Then the turn ends, and Hanzo is gone. He slips from Cole’s stricken arms and goes to take Mei’s hand, only to be accosted by Genji, who swoops in from behind, lifts his brother up and makes loud, declarative statements in Japanese. Cole registers Hanzo’s shouts of protest before the ringing in his ear turns into a high-pitched siren.

He staggers away from the whirling bodies, back to the cooler, where he grabs an ice cold bottle straight from the bottom and holds it against his neck. His spurs catch a crack in the concrete. He falls into a fold-up chair beside Lúcio. The musician is too hyper-focused on the music to notice the shaken cowboy at his side.

Cole sees the whirling silhouettes against the bright fire and the indigo night. He sees the multi-colored light streaks from Lúcio’s deck. He can even see the stars and the embers that fly towards them, birthing and flaring and dying against a backdrop of endless constellations. But he has no thoughts about any of it. His mind has been blown clear by a few seconds of inhaling Hanzo's air, feeling Hanzo's body against his own. Seeing those eyes from up close, sensing the hunger that he prayed to God wasn't just his cinematic imagination.

The past, for the moment, has died -- burnt up. He’s living in a world of evergreen chaos and it really, really hurts.

He’s not sure how much time has passed when he notices that Lúcio has a guitar. It’s a plain old acoustic but the strings respond to careful tuning. The night is well on its way to being day, but there’s still a few agents lingering in the dwindling firelight. Angela and Winston have gone. Zenyatta’s glow is nowhere to be seen. Genji is leaving, waving good-night to Hanzo and Hana. Hanzo’s eyes are more heavy-lidded than ever as he absorbs Hana’s chatter and Cole can tell, even fifty yards away, that he is drunk. He looks comfortable -- malleable, even. Just waiting to be tucked into bed.

Cole’s about to get up and suggest such when Lúcio thumps the guitar in his lap.

“C’mon, Cole -- Lena told me you were good. Play us out with some country flavor!”

The cowboy groans with equal parts delight and horror; Gabe, the consummate guitar player, taught Cole a couple chords during long stretches between missions. This could very well be one of his. The gunslinger runs his calloused hand over the chipped belly and tests the action with a brittle *twang* . One strum and he’s sure this instrument once belonged to Reyes: nylon strings, dark mahogany, worn paint where he'd drummed the lower bout.

He can see the big man now, one arm clutching a beer, the other slung around Jack’s shoulders. That rich, half-mocking laughter. *Come on, Cole . You remember your strings? Every Amateur Does Get Better Eventually?*

Cole only knows a handful of songs off the top of his head, but one in particular pops up above the rest. He can’t remember where he learned it. Before Blackwatch, before Deadlock -- somewhere in that windswept desert he calls a memory. Back before he decided to assemble who he was out of spare parts and celluloid dreams. Back before he thought more about what *was* than what lay right in front of him. Back before he lost an opportunity to flirt with a beautiful man because he was too stuck up his own ass all night.

“I got one,” he mutters.

Lúcio sits with a sheepskin drum between his knees. He smiles at Cole, stone-sober and overflowing with mirth. Reinhardt sits across the bonfire from Hanzo and Hana. Lena is laying on her side, her head in Mei’s lap. All is wind, crickets and crackling fire. On with the show.

Cole strums the opening bars and Lúcio catches on quick. The chords are simple, as are the words. They fit well around the cowboy’s voice, which grows from a deep rumble to a diaphragm-vibrating wail. Alive, like the fire. As haunted as he feels. He knocks hard on the strings but they don’t carry the crisp brightness he likes: too soft, like a classical instrument. He doesn’t want soft. He wants steel.

At the wailing note of the first chorus, Hanzo looks his way. Cole can’t see his face. He can’t see much. That old feeling is starting to tug at his spine, pull him down into his own twisted

guts, making him want to cut a joke or his own fingers on the strings. Anything to keep it at bay.

He tries to think of only the song. He focuses on the words and the images they bring. Bad deeds done long ago. The embrace of the morning sun. The first of spring making everything new. The kind of love that makes a bad man turn good.

Hanzo is still staring but Cole can't hold his gaze. It's too much. It's all too much: the music, the fire, the dead voices playing through the static of his brain, ghosts cheering him on or calling him out, dragging him down through the earth and into a cave of mind. An echo chamber of awful. He grins hard over the restless demons, swallows them up, breathes in the shadow and pours out white smoke. Singing, for him, is a release; whether it's a coarse lament or a dressed-down hallelujah, he feels something open and drain.

The song ends with a hard and resounding strum and Cole pants through his nostrils like a winded horse. There's sleepy applause and then Lena wraps her arms around his neck, tipsily tells him that he's a good man, and pushes his hat over his face before shoving away. Cole grins, calls her a sweetheart under his breath. Lúcio waves his hands through the air while describing the colors conjured by Cole's sounds -- bright orange-red and endless shades of brown, punctured with swipes of black and glimmers of gold. The gunslinger grins again, rises to his feet, looks for Hanzo but sees that the archer has disappeared.

It's about time that he did the same. There comes a perfect moment to leave every party and you gotta meet it when it arrives. As attention circles back around Lúcio's drumming, Cole steps away to grab another beer and takes an Irish Exit into the dark.

His spurs rattle with drunken irregularity on the tarmac until he finds himself at his dormitory's entrance. He punches in the code but it doesn't respond. He tries again, grunting and focusing his mind through the influence of the booze, but still nothing.

Then he takes a step back and looks up. This isn't his dorm: it's Hanzo's. And it's the old Blackwatch code he entered.

Cursing a beer-stained fog, Cole stumbles away. He doesn't want to see a bed -- not his own, anyway. He knows what kind of torment lay in wait should he hit the sack with energy still left in his limbs.

He has to run himself, like a horse. Exhaust the fire until he can collapse on the ashes. He takes off for the hills with thoughtless spontaneity and it doesn't surprise him one iota when he once again finds white limestone under his boots.

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The cave is the same at night. Nothing alive fills its hollows, so there is nothing that sleeps. No light disturbs the pools and no wind disturbs the dirt. A perfect relic of itself. Cole walks through the yawning cavern, breathes deep the chaste air and is pleased to find no change; the first and only constant he's ever found on Gibraltar. It's too bad he never found it before.

It helps him relax. When his mind wants to think of the past, he lets it. When his body wants to shudder with the tension it brings, he allows himself the feeling. Liquor brings lassitude and the weakness necessary to let go. What's that saying -- God protects drunks and fools? This stony cathedral seems holy enough. He could trip forward in the dark and still find his footing.

But he doesn't feel as drunk as he did when he first started up the path. The light from his phone helped him up the rock and now it guides him through the flowstone and stalagmites. He takes the same route as earlier, towards the opening in the cliff, where the unhindered horizon awaits. Staring out at an intangible distance always did make him feel better.

Once he finally reaches that widened corridor, he's rewarded with the sight of a utopian seascape. The horizon and the ocean have once again struck the same chord: soft indigo touched with silver, like the aloe that grew in the concrete cracks around where he grew up. He lets out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and ambles to the precipice.

He finds Hanzo through sheer fate. There isn't any other explanation. Cole stops and, for no reason at all, his head turns to look at the exact spot where Hanzo is sitting. No shock, no jump -- just a meeting of eyes through the black.

Once again, Cole has to thank whoever keeps providing him with such splendid serendipity.

The archer is nestled into the more verdant side of the open cliffside, surrounded by wind-licked ferns, like so many servants waving fans. He is shrouded from the moonlight, silent beneath the crash of waves. With the glint of his golden sash and the stillness of his form, he reminds Cole of a fluorescent snake. Always coiled, even when at rest.

Hanzo leans forward over crossed legs, into the light. Cole knows what he's going to say before he opens his mouth.

"Did you follow me?"

Cole taps his nose. "Followed my nose."

Hanzo's eyes narrow to black slits.

“No lie, Shimada. I got your scent.” His voice slurs with alcohol but gets clearer as he goes, “I could smell you a continent away n’chase you down like a hound dog. No question.”

“I suppose you need one advantage, loud as you are.”

“Heard me coming, huh?”

“I always do.”

“Good,” grunts Cole, lowering himself to the grass. “That’s real good.”

Hanzo shifts a couple inches to the right, even though he’s already at least ten feet away. “Are you drunk?”

Cole burps without covering his mouth. “Lil’ bit.”

“Be serious. How did you know I was here?”

“Didn’t. Found this cave earlier today and my feet carried me to it.”

“Hn.” Hanzo doesn’t believe him, but that’s alright. Cole’s used to the archer’s distrust; he doesn’t take it personally.

“You come here often, darlin’?”

Another scoff. “Yes. I wanted a quiet place to meditate." He looks pointedly at Cole. "One where I would not be interrupted.”

Cole sighs at the moon. “Couldn’t’ve picked a nicer spot.”

Hanzo sighs in return, his shoulders falling. As he turns back to the scenery, Cole sees the tension drain from his body. Even dragons must get tired of fighting every once in a while.

The cool and saltless wind picks up as they drift into another familiar silence. Twin jet trails slash the starry vault, one over the other, a cross of bright cerulean streaks; the only clouds in the sky. A gibbous moon drops a trail of glitter from the watery horizon all the way to where Cole and Hanzo sit in the dark. The gunslinger starts to hum that old folk song again, but slower, rolling out the notes in the pit of his throat.

“Your singing was lovely.”

Cole turns his entire head. “Come again?”

“You have a pleasant voice. I enjoyed hearing it.”

Cole looks at Hanzo like he'd just lashed him with a whip. “Are *you* drunk?”

Hanzo leans back, shrugs, as unconcerned as the glassy sea. “Not especially.”

“You sneak some of my dope?”

“Tch. I have given you compliments before, Cassidy.”

“Name one.”

Hanzo hesitates long enough for the cowboy to finger-gun at him: *gotchya* .

“I have been rude to you.” The archer is blunt, yet pointedly not apologizing. He looks down as he bundles his jacket in his lap, adding: “You did not make a good first impression.”

“Yeah,” Cole faces the horizon again, obliging. “Wasn’t very polite, I suppose. Forgot my manners. Been a bad man for too long.”

“Hm,” Hanzo grunts, as if conceding: *so have I.*

Cole takes in a deep, lung-expanding breath and lets it out with another rattling sigh. Sitting makes him feel less drunk, but that doesn’t mean he isn't; there’ll be another reminder of his advancing age come morning, he's sure. He looks back at Hanzo from over his shoulder, wonders if he’s feeling the same. The archer lacks his usual poise: slumped, preoccupied -- five minutes from falling asleep yet miles and miles away. The only sign of life is his focus, pointed down at the sheer edge before them. A knot in his brow and a fidget to his fingers. Lost and transfixed at the same time.

Cole turns away. "Y'know..." He oscillates, leans back on his elbows, pulls out the grass with his metal fingers and pushes it back into the earth. He tries to keep his tone light, or as light as he can manage. “Y’ain’t the only one with good eyes, Han. I see how you look down from high places.” He chews his cheek, presses forward with drunken momentum, “Like you’re judging the distance.”

Silence from the rock.

“Had me real scared for awhile, but then,” Cole lets out a deep breath, rips up more grass, “I saw how y’were ‘round Genji. And with Mei. Hana. You got something big keeping y’here, and it seems like it’s getting bigger. Was less scared… after that.”

He lets the wind take the torn grass from his hand. Two sins in two seconds; the stone cathedral will send a swift judgment. If he’s learned anything about the eldest Shimada, it’s that the man hates weakness, especially in himself. He's seen him nearly break his own back after a less-than-perfect training session. He’s heard him curse himself after having said or done something he'd regretted. There’s no way he's gonna let Cole slide for bringing up his self-annihilating thoughts *and* pointing out Cole's own fear of said thoughts -- another kind of weakness.

But the cowboy loves the taste of honesty on his lips. Refreshing, like the high altitude wind. His favored state of being; the one thing he wants to give Hanzo most of all.

With a bite to his inner cheek, Cole realizes he may be after more than just a few stolen nights with this man.

“If I ever *do* kill myself,” Hanzo mutters, “It will be because it is the only honorable course left to me.”

“Stop.”

“Stop what?"

“Stop talking like that,” Cole growls, “I don’t wanna hear it.”

Hanzo straightens his back, resumes his throne. “You brought it up.”

“Only ‘cause I wanted to…” Cole throws up his hand, shrugging, “Let you know you weren’t alone or something.”

A disbelieving chuckle. “Did you.”

“Yeah,” Cole brays, short and faux-petulant, whipping his chin over his shoulder to give Hanzo a challenging look. It instantly transforms into a wry grin, his sleepy lids low under a raised brow. “T’repay you in kind for your sweet compliment about my 'lovely' singing.”

Hanzo is looking at the jacket in his lap. He usually evades outright eye contact out of politeness (unless he means to intimidate with the severity of his stare,) but this is different. He strokes the satin hem with a strange fixation.

Cole faces the horizon and rubs his neck. He flicks his lighter and thinks of Hanzo’s face during the few seconds they danced.

“You have fun at the party? Looked like you were getting along well.”

Hanzo scoffs hard, as if to argue, but then: "I did. *We* did. Genji, ah... he found someone to mend my gourd."

“He what now?”

The archer takes the old canteen from his jacket pocket and lifts it to the light. Cole’s eyes go wide; even in the dark, he can see luminous gold veins outlining every crack, like spider-lightning through the body of the ouroboros.

“Ho- *lee* shit. Is that real?”

“It is.” Hanzo barely gives Cole a chance to look at it before pushing it back into his pocket, protective. “It's an ancient method of repairing ceramics with gold. He would not tell me how he did it. Thought it was funnier to keep me in the dark.”

Cole chuckles. “Damn. I kinda like it better now.”

Hanzo smiles as the wind pushes loose strands of hair over his face. “So do I.”

“God damn.” The cowboy turns away, scratches his neck again, tries to get a hold of his racing heart. “Wish I could give you something that good.”

Hanzo lets a pause hang. Cole expects another display of acerbic wit, but he's been wrong all night.

The archer’s voice is soft. “What do you mean?”

“A present. Something nice.”

“Such as?”

“I dunno,” Cole grunts, raises a brow over his shoulder again, glosses over his vulnerability with fox-like charm. “Something to catch your pretty eyes.”

Hanzo chuckles. For the first time, the gunslinger hears no smugness in the sound, and that alone raises the hair on his arms.

“I would not have this if it were not for you.”

“You're thanking me for breaking your shit?”

“For being…” Hanzo searches for the right word but comes up with nothing. Instead, he just waves his hand at Cole, gesturing to all of him at once. Then he drops his eyes to his lap again.

It’s Cole’s turn to scoff in disbelief. He isn’t sure he understands the archer, which is not a novel sensation. They run into all kinds of cultural differences and personality hiccups in all the time they spend together. Usually it’s nothing they can’t smooth over with intuition and explanation. But as Cole stares at Hanzo, waiting for something clear to take form, all he sees is a nebulae.

Forever taking the optimistic route, the cowboy clucks his tongue and smiles out at the sea. “I could get used to you being this sweet.”

Hanzo lets out a single huff that Cole interprets as laughter. Then the wind speaks for awhile.

The cowboy falls into the same place he always falls into whenever he’s here, in the quiet with Hanzo Shimada. He used to feel his best when the sun was directly overhead, but nowadays he feels the opposite -- like he doesn’t stop pretending until it’s midnight and he’s sharing a shadow with the archer. He can stand tall at high noon, assured in himself and the equity of the world; who he is when the lights are turned off might be something only Hanzo knows.

This is why Cole can never stop moving, and why he can only sit still in moments like these; he knows the sins that he sits with are sitting with Hanzo, too. And he knows that Hanzo knows about them, and still stays.

Well... most of them. And Hanzo's got secrets, too. But that just makes it all the richer.

“God damn,” Cole scoff-laughs at the sea, rubbing his sore right socket. “I’m real glad you wound up here, Hanzo.”

He raises his hand, traces Orion’s sword in the sky and slowly lowers himself so that the Deadeye can close against the cool grass. His left stares across the water, at the point of greatest distance, that place where detail dissolves into possibility.

Like a slow, soft-footed predator, Hanzo descends from his place in the dark. He crawls across the grass, sits at Cole’s back and it is this action alone that makes the cowboy's pulse start to jump.

He knows what’s about to happen. He’s realizing it now: he *knows* Hanzo. They’ve been fighting and drinking and talking (and not talking) for months. Autumn will forever be a reminder of their bristly back-and-forth, tangerine skies and Tangiers smoke, the steady decay of their respective walls. He knows this man in the wordless pit of his guts, that place that has taken him through near-death experiences and unknown territories of all kinds. His instincts have always been fire and they're not failing him now. He knows that Hanzo is about to try something, even if he doesn’t know what.

It’s why he turns his head to look up at the same time Hanzo sinks his fingers into Cole’s hair.

The gunslinger goes still. His lips part. He searches Hanzo’s face: stunning, calm, ethereal. He closes his mouth and takes it all back; he doesn't know this man at all.

So he faces the horizon and puts his head in Hanzo’s lap. The archer pauses, then combs with serene fingers. He gathers the long strands at Cole's nape. He slowly traces a scratch behind his ear, a souvenir from their last simulation. He caresses him both as if it’s the last time they’ll be together and also as he would a lover of many decades. As if they’d spent countless nights like this, in one past life or many. Cole never would’ve predicted such gentleness from that man’s calloused hands, and now it seems like the only imaginable possibility.

Another deep sigh rattles his smoke-scarred lungs as he tries to shut down his mind. The wind glides on uninterrupted. Hanzo plays with his hair without clear purpose or design, but then again, when has he ever been able to work out the archer's real intentions? What about this is different from his other enigmatic behaviors? And was there a purpose required; wasn’t the point of play just to play? Has he *ever* seen Hanzo do something just for the pleasure of it, aside from drinking himself mindless?

A spot on Cole's nape sparks like the start of a wildfire; Hanzo is stroking the area, lingering, even holding the back of his neck -- possessive. Testing. Cole exhales, reaches up, takes Hanzo’s hand and brings it to his mouth. He places one, two, five kisses on the archer’s scarred knuckles and breathes hot against his skin. A lamp-glow plea for more. Every brush of his lips sends a firework screaming down his limbs. Cole can feel his guts uncoiling as he inhales Hanzo’s unique smell: sage, something grassy. A hint of the kind of soap someone like Cole could never afford.

Then Hanzo pulls him upward and Cole, in his tipsy pliability, scrapes his boots to meet the effort. He leans back against the archer's tattooed shoulder. Hanzo turns his jaw until they are eye-to-eye. He's *holding* Cole. Cole gets a whiff of sweet wheat breath before anticipation stoppers his throat and makes his eyes flutter shut.

But there's no kiss. Not even a graze. Hanzo just presses his left hand over Cole's mouth and presses the right against his hip flexor, making Cole's thighs part involuntarily.

And that does it. It's not the archer's stroking hand that undoes him, groping around his hips, it's the hand clamped over his mouth. Cole's entire head feels locked in Hanzo's vice-like arm, that pressing palm the final latch. His spurs scrape gravel into clouds and his big chest fights his shirt buttons with every panting breath.

He's leaning back against Hanzo Shimada. He's trapped in his arms. He's just sober enough to know that this isn't a dream.

"I know," Hanzo whispers, reading his damn mind. He stares right into Cole's eyes, his nose nearly brushing his own knuckles. High cheekbones and a deep frown create a mask of darkness from which Cole can pull no anchor. Fear mixes with his arousal until one feeds the other, a closed circuit of emotion sparking from chest to groin.

Zero to fuckin' sixty .

Cole is still falling, still reeling as Hanzo slides his hand across his stomach, stroking and massaging his obliques. He reaches back with his right arm and clutches Hanzo's hair, making him hiss, but the cowboy holds tight. He has to -- pleasure is boiling along his inseam, his joints, the space just below his belly. His arousal is slicked from so many obscure angles that he can already feel his lower insides sparking awake, longing to be caressed. When Hanzo presses on his belly, he can feel shockwaves emanate from the spot. He can feel so much more than only his stirring cock.

His voice is trapped against Hanzo's wet palm, but the sentiment is clear: *holy shit.*

Then that clever hand squeezes Cole's inner thigh and the cowboy's legs go even wider. His pelvis lurches and his metal fingers pull up grass by the roots. He pulls Hanzo's hair, too, enough to make it slip from its sash. Hanzo remains steady, gropes the swollen flesh through the cowboy's worn jeans, focuses on the supple muscle right next to his groin. He wrings, caresses; he manipulates Cole's soft parts like he's got a map of what will make him squirm hardest.

Another damp moan is muffled against his hand. The struggle for freedom intensifies-- Cole wants a proper embrace, to pin Hanzo down and grind him into the earth -- but he's as implacable as the sea.

Then he spreads his fingers against Cole's strained zipper and traces down. His voice is low and growling and totally foreign; there are two Hanzo's, and this one sounds like he was born in that subterranean cathedral, unleashed for a night to torment the day walkers: "you like that?"

Cole’s body rolls like a wave, searching, straining. *W recked* .

“I noticed," he whispers, "How you always sit with your knees so far apart." The languor of his tone matches the lazy groping -- no part of him is in any rush, and knowing that just makes Cole harder. “How you swing when you walk. Stretching your hips when you stand, like you hate being still.” He's so close to smiling. “You like having your thighs touched, don’t you? Here,” he strokes up and down Cole’s inner thigh with insistent fingertips. Then he pushes up, across his hip and over his ass, “And here...” he massages over the sciatic nerve and presses deep.

A drowning groan makes the ball in Cole’s throat bounce. Hanzo rubs straight through his gluteus like the denim and the round muscle are no obstacle, working sensations out of Cole that he is unequipped to handle -- exposed beyond belief, moreso than if he were naked. Stroked from the inside out. It's getting painful behind his zipper.

“I have also noticed,” Hanzo speaks with his lips brushing his own knuckles, “How often you touch yourself.”

Cole’s pupils blow up to black.

That night-creature voice is hot blue flame. There’s no escaping his eyes, as dilated as Cole’s own. “You stroke your own cock all the time, do you not?"

The gunslinger goes slack in Hanzo’s arms, as vulnerable as if he’d been struck by a poisonous dart. Or an arrow.

“I notice when you come from your dorm with a certain look,” Hanzo trails his nose against Cole’s, still unsmiling. It's the lack of smile that burns him most. “You are looser. Redder. What is the longest you’ve ever gone without it?” A playful rhetorical -- Cole is practically gagged. “A few days?”

Hanzo trails his fingers up the inseam of his jeans, along the length of his obvious hardness. “Do you think about me when you do it?”

Cole muffles an affirming groan against the archer’s palm, even as he struggles against Hanzo’s restraining arm.

“Cole,” the archer whispers, a wisp of exhilaration passing from his mouth straight into the gunslinger’s heaving lungs. He looks right through him. “You are trembling.”

The cowboy glares through a haze of lust at the sound of his own name, so dark and sweet on Hanzo’s tongue. His body ceases to resist. He feels Hanzo coalesce around him like that shifting beach sand.

Hanzo speaks with his lips brushing his own knuckles: “Did you imagine it like this?”

The cowboy closes his eyes with a wretched groan, then opens them again with challenging, fiery resolve. His fingers tighten in Hanzo’s hair, bunching it up, ready to yank at any second.

The impasse is just a part of it -- he knows that Hanzo knows that Cole will not interfere. Not when he's leaking through his denim.

The archer's fingers slip around a shirt button and scissor it open in a soft prelude of his true desires. "Did you think about how you would shake in my arms?" He kisses his own hand directly over Cole's mouth. "Hm?" He places another kiss on Cole's sore eye.

Cole lets out a desperate whine, sharp and clear and nasal. In no corner of his imagination could he have ever conjured anything resembling a moment like this. The invasive groping, the restraining grip, the sight of those dark eyes piercing him so thoroughly, the thick black viscosity that is his deep whisper… The gunslinger is well beyond shame, bucking air, anything to show Hanzo how much he loves it, how much he wants him. All of his lower half is twitching for more contact, even as he continues unbuttoning his shirt.

Then it hits him. Hanzo is unbuttoning his shirt.

Cole's eyes flash wide. His whole body seizes and he wrenches against his restraints, but it's too late. Hanzo has spread him open and is looking down with an expression like a car crash.

The gunslinger's torso is riddled with metal. Not seamless planes of high tech, but a patchwork job of badly-stitched gashes and canyons of scars. Twin sockets with electric turquoise rims glow on either side of his navel, embedded in scarred flesh, coinciding with the metallic tubes on his favored breastplate. There are identical cylindrical slots just under his large, muscled pectorals. Looking inside, one couldn't be blamed for thinking that it's steel all the way down.

Hanzo leans back to get a better look and Cole winces, dropping his hands to the ground. There's a shiny steel grate over a field of fused flesh, there's a row of what look like actual bolts next to his thick trail of hair and a couple artificial rib braces on his right flank. In between the metal and patches of scar-tissue are mangled tattoos, at least three of them, only one of which is clear enough to make out in the dark -- a winged skull over a lock, big and brazen on his right shoulder.

Hanzo's hand drops from Cole's mouth. "Explain."

But the gunslinger can't get a word out. He's lost in Hanzo's stricken eyes.

A python's hiss: *"explain."*

"I didn't mean to... I wasn't tryin'a hide it --"

"Yet you did. *Very* effectively."

Cole moves to sit up and feels a stab of loss at how readily Hanzo lets him go. His hand is still clutching the archer's golden sash as he shuffles away, closer to the cliff, stuck on his knees. He's still hard as a rock in his denim. His metal hand hovers over the glowing turquoise lights on his abdomen, but they gleam just as brightly as Genji's slots. As Zenyatta's orbs.

Hanzo sits back on his heels, his fists tight over his thighs. Glaring like Cole has never seen.

"Speak."

"What d'you want me to say?" Cole breathes out.

That turns Hanzo's glare into something downright sinister. "Are you a cyborg?"

"Not even half."

"Then what is all of this? Explain!"

"Fuck-ups, mostly. You don't wanna --"

"Your arm? It was Overwatch's addition, too?"

"Uhh…" Cole clears his throat, then recites: "cargo train explosion over Deadlock Gorge, New Mexico."

"You are lying."

"I swear I'm not. Darlin' -- I'm *not* . "

But he can't bring himself to elaborate. Cole is trapped, and not just between a sheer cliff face and a pissed off *yakuza ;* he's drunk, he's agitated, and he's desperate. Stories screech and flap through his mind too fast to pick out even a single word. How can he trust his own gut when it contorts into unrecognizable shapes every time Hanzo looks at him like that?

More than that -- Cole isn't ready to talk about it, and liking Hanzo as much as he does just makes it that much harder.

Hanzo stands up. "Your gun is attuned to all of this," he gestures to Cole's midsection, "Is it not?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"S'apart of me. Always was, always will be. Hanzo, I can't…" Cole's temper ignites along with his desperation. He tries to sugar it with charm: "honey, can't we just --"

"Do *not* ." Hanzo hisses a warning, his eyes still tracing every artificial shape. "Why do you *lie?"*

"Baby --"

"Urusai." Hanzo raises a clawed hand to his own brow. His palm drags down his face, blocking his mouth. Then he drops his hand and half-turns away. "It's fine. It is fine. I... must leave."

He raises his hand to Cole in a decisive slash, glaring down from impassable darkness: “do *not* follow me.”

Then he disappears into the cavern.

And Cole sits there, his shirt hanging loose on his shoulder and his knees digging into the torn up grass. When he finally does stand, he rolls the sash into his pocket, picks up his hat and shuffles back down the mouth of the cathedral. He doesn’t imagine the trinity would have his back on this one. Not when his back’s half-metal.

Cole drags his feet through the ill-lit hall of the western dormitory. His spurs don’t tap so much as scrape the hard floor and before he’s even passed her bunk, Hana's door flies open and her head pokes out. Her baseball cap is gone and she’s got a cantankerous look on her face. Her eyes are inflamed -- probably from the lingering effects of the red tide still embedded in her bedsheets. Or maybe the fumes from the bonfire. Or the cigar smoke.

“Hey,” she snaps.

He turns towards her, thumbs hooking his belt-loops. “Hey yourself."

A pause. The cowboy leans heavy on one hip. Hana looks at her own pink sneakers. Cole thinks she looks just like Hanzo does whenever he’s about to ask for help.

“I’m not, um...” Hana stops, sniffs, then rounds her voice up to something softer. “Wanna play a game?”

Cole hesitates, then nods and shuffles into her dorm. They sit on the couch under the window, letting the breeze cool their necks while they load up a team-based shooter on portable devices -- there’s no way he’d last against her in one-on-one. Hana tucks her heels on the edge and bends over her console like a wary, feeding rodent. Cole’s boots spread out on the carpet, his whole body one big slump. His shirt's still unbuttoned to where Hanzo had stopped.

“What’s eating you, sugar?”

“I get weird after parties sometimes,” Hana sighs, tapping into her favorite avatar. “Even when I have fun -- which, like, I always do. I just can’t stop thinking about every little thing. And I missed all these messages,” she rolls her eyes, a little more terse, “My fans, my government... they want me to come back to the MEKA unit.”

“Oh.” Cole stares dumbly at his screen as he scrolls through the character selection. “Yeah. Gotta be rough.”

“It’s okay.” Another deep, gratifying breath and some of her old pluck returns. “It’s okay, really. They’ll be fine. Overwatch needs me.”

Unsure of the right thing to say, he shoots for the truth: “I think so.”

Hana doesn’t say much more after that. They play a few rounds before she shuts off her console without warning and flops against Cole’s side like a worn-out rabbit. Tired of keeping her ears so high. Finally safe, back in her warren.

The cowboy drapes his arm over the couch and tilts his head to look at the upside-down sky. It hurts his neck, but that’s how he falls asleep.

He doesn’t wake until the horizon is drenched with blossoming red, poking through his similarly colored eyelids. Rising as slow as he can, Cole gently lowers Hana to a couch pillow, covers her with a blanket, and heads back to his own room. He finds Hanzo's sash in his pocket on the way there and wraps it around his hand before be passes out again. Falls asleep with it pressed close to his mouth.

For the first time in a long time, he doesn’t dream, and he doesn’t wake with the sun.

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Morning burns too bright, too hot. Cole’s sitting in the main room of Winston’s lab, where the expansive windows treat the Overwatch team just like a magnifying glass treats ants. Hana’s on his right, waving a paper fan -- the girl didn’t drink much, but what she did imbibe clearly left its mark. No one questions her big sunglasses or her seltzer, though Cole did tease her a bit when she first walked into the mess earlier. They took a post-party selfie together during breakfast, Hana throwing a V-sign and Cole stoically donning her bug-eyed shades. As Winston rolls out the holograms, the cowboy indulges a warm smile. He’s in a good mood, despite everything.

He was telling the truth when he said he hadn’t intentionally hidden the state of his body from Hanzo, though he hadn’t exactly been scrambling to let him know either. He’d toyed with the idea of bringing it up after Hanzo had gotten used to Genji -- or maybe he’d hoped that Hanzo would be more keen by the time he saw Cole with his shirt off. Now that it was all out in the open, he felt buoyed with relief, and had hope that he could eventually bring the archer around. Maybe Genji would even help.

But despite not having had that much to drink, Genji seems miserable this morning. He’s cross-legged on the other side of the stiff white couch, his head resting against his fingers in a

distinctly un-zen manner. Physical ailments don't much bother the cyborg, so Cole's got to wonder what's wrong with him.

Too slippery to tell . Cole won't get an answer out of either of them until they're ready to talk, but that's alright. It's only a matter of time. Great timing.

He tries to push the memory of Hanzo's strong hands out of his mind as Winston dives into the formal debriefing. He follows the scientist's run-down of the data they obtained from Volskaya: upcoming operations, Katya Volskaya's goals, their company initiatives concerning mech development. Not all of the presentation is relevant to the Overwatch strike force, but Cole pays attention best he can. Winston seems to agree with Moscow that a joint effort with Volskaya is Russia's greatest hope for quelling the Siberian omnic insurgence. The next few months' work will be integral to the RDF securing key points on the eastern front.

"Which is why," Winston removes his glasses to wipe them with a tiny cloth, "I believe Overwatch should continue to operate in secret."

Silence against the glaring light. He looks out at the agents with one part hesitance to two parts conviction. Cole gets the impression that he's polling the room without asking outright.

Lúcio sits up straight, raises a hand, "Wait, wait, wait. You mean, like, permanently?"

"Well," Winston replaces his glasses and adjusts them over his nose, "For the foreseeable future. I've been running scenarios with Athena for months and this seems like our best option. We've managed to secure good footing with Volskaya and the Russian government. They are willing to work with us in a clandestine partnership to stop the attacks from the Siberian omnium."

"Until the Russians decide they want us to do something we don't wanna do," Torbjörn grumbles. "There'll be no autonomy! We'll turn into another Moscow shadow-agency, doing her bidding under threat of exposure."

"What about the refugee issues in the surrounding nations?" says Angela. "Russia is doing little to stop repatriation from its neighbors. Their interests are their own, not the world's."

Reinhardt thumbs his beard. "We may cross swords with them in the future."

"It's not ideal," says Winston, "But it's the best way to do the most good without being shut down. It's an unavoidable reality that the public -- including major corporations and governments -- still think that Overwatch was a criminal organization. Eventually, we will have to face the UN, and it'd be best to do it when we have more successful missions under our belt *and* the support of a major omnic-threatened country like Russia."

Lena crosses her arms, uncomfortably leaning against the station desk at Winston's right. "I tend to agree, lads. That first mission nearly tore us apart. Might be best to take it slow right out the gate."

"But," Lúcio moves to the edge of his stool, "Isn't that just playin' into the worst things people said about Overwatch? Working in secret, thinking we can do whatever we want as

long as we don't get caught? I mean, look, I'm all for subverting the crooked powers that be, but I dunno if it's gonna look good when it comes out that we've been operating in secret for however long, on our own, with only Russia to back us up -- which they might not even do!"

"It is a matter of deciding which risk we want to take." Reinhardt lets out a rough sigh. "Either we reveal that we have *already* operated against the UN's authority and hope we can avoid prosecution and disbandment, or we carry on as we have and hope our record speaks for us when the curtain finally rises. We must be willing to push forward, no matter which we choose -- justice must be done."

Cole leans forward. "What kinda justice is it to sidestep what we all really want -- a new and better Overwatch? What good's it gonna do all the other parts of the world that're suffering, not knowing Overwatch is back? Russia's a big issue, but it's not the only one. You're tryin'a protect something small so it can grow, but we ain't gonna grow at all if we don't see some sun."

"We will have a hard time finding new agents or convincing old ones to join if we continue in secret," muses Genji.

"Exactly. Overwatch worked before 'cause it *worked* , not because the damn UN told everyone we were straight as far as they were concerned."

"Yeah," Lúcio chimes in, "The haters, man, I could care less. The *people* need to know we're around. They'll support us because we're *Overwatch .*"

Hana gestures with her fan, "Right on."

Reinhardt, regarding Lúcio, nurses a glimmer of a smile. "If the UN reacts badly, we may have a very different kind of battle to wage, on top of the one we already have. But I for one will meet whatever fight comes."

Angela's voice rises, "Is that the kind of Overwatch we want -- one that is willing to *fight the UN?* An international para-military force with no external oversight?" She leans back in her chair, shaking her head. "No. If we are to set down the path of every other corrupt organization in the history of the planet, I will have no part of it."

"Angela, no one is saying that." Winston removes his glasses again and pinches his nose bridge. "I agree that we need oversight, but if the UN decides to shut us down, then that's it. We won't be able to help *anyone* . We will be highly publicized fugitives if we go against their explicit directives, and no, that is not the kind of Overwatch I want to be a part of. If we wait just a little longer, we will be able to counter those opposed to us with *real* evidence of the good we have done. The UN will not go against the wishes of the rest of the world."

"I ain't for trusting Russia or anyone else who isn't us," Torbjörn rumbles, "But we've already gone against Petras. It might not be a bad idea to wait until we're in a better position to convince people that we are a better Overwatch -- not the Overwatch the world came to know through years of media smear tactics."

“Agreed,” says Angela. She looks to Lúcio, who is scoffing, “You are too young to understand, Lúcio. You were not there when Overwatch was torn apart from outside-in. How its legacy was destroyed.”

“Well, I was,” Cole leans back on the couch and crosses his arms, “And I still say we can’t pussy-foot around the issue of going public when we all *know* it’s the right thing to do. If we don’t, ain’t just Russian interference we gotta contend with on our own. Talon *knows* we’re here, and they got former Blackwatch agents to tell ‘em exactly how to hit us where it hurts.”

All eyes turn to Cole, save Genji, who carefully folds his metallic fingers in his lap.

“Are you talking about the train incident again?” says Reinhardt, almost chuckling. *“Mein Gott* , Cole, that was one time.”

“The Talon agents at the mech factory were running by the original Blackwatch playbook. If they got Blackwatch tactics, you can be sure they got Blackwatch intel, and they’ll be using it to line up their best shot any day now. They already hit us once. With Reaper.”

More silence. Mei, who has been scribbling notes on her holobook this entire time, looks worriedly from Cole to Winston. Even in a room full of certified bad-asses, mention of the shadowy mercenary known as the Reaper creates a palpable chill.

“No,” says Angela, shaking her head with finality. “No, I cannot see that happening. I looked after Blackwatch agents as well as Overwatch. I knew them.”

“Y’weren't their only doctor, Angie."

Another palpable chill. Recalling Blackwatch's lead physician was almost worse than mentioning the Reaper. Even Cole suppressed the image of Dr. Moira O'Deorain when it popped into his static-filled head.

"And Blackwatch was full’a people that grew up dreaming about their next meal way before dreaming about saving the world. Some of them never changed those priorities. If you’re outta work with nothin’ but major crimes and a lambasted organization on your CV, you’re gonna take the best deal you can find. Talon eats that shit up.”

“I still highly doubt it, Cole,” says Angela, her brand of warmth infinitely kind, yet distant -- like a mountain breeze that could turn into a cold front at any moment. “And even if there *are* former Blackwatch operatives in the Talon ranks, how much intel could they possibly have?”

“Enough to break Athena’s loop-frequency and negate her radar. They knew exactly where we were in that factory, and we had no idea half their team was fixing to flank us.”

“They would’ve had to have at *least* top secret clearance to bypass Athena’s security!” says Torbjörn. “Did Reyes go around passing out classified information to grunt agents?”

Cole grinds his jaw. “Didn’t say I knew how they did it. I’m sayin’ they did it.”

Winston sits in his chair, staring at the open holo-tablet on his service station, where Athena’s emblem glows in silent blue. “They did manage to break through her firewalls last summer.

They may have an intelligent hacker in their employ."

"What I'm sayin'."

"Okay, Cole," Winston thumbs the scruff on his jaw, "Let's say that you're right, and former members of Blackwatch are working for Talon now. Let's say that they have enough knowledge of Athena's systems to negate her remote scrambling signal *and* the sensors. And let's assume they have other information as well -- intel more conducive to planning an attack. Then why haven't they come after us yet, while our team is small and our organization unprotected by outside groups?"

Cole sits up to answer, but Genji gets there first: "Talon is used to operating with small strike teams, much like Blackwatch. Perhaps they have not attacked since summer because you have fortified both the base and Athena's servers many times over since then. It is natural that they would assume this, if not test it themselves, secretly. They may not have enough intelligence to push forward at the moment, but I believe they would -- *will* -- do everything within their power to obtain it."

"And we all know what kinda lengths Talon'll go to once they're set on something."

Another shadow hangs over the room, about the shape and size of former agent Gérard Lacroix and his spindly, ballerina wife. Cole wants to spit, remembering the name Amélie, but again he suppresses the urge. Lena stares at the floor.

"No offense, Genji," says Torbjörn, "But you spent most of your time with Overwatch hunting down your old clan members. Your knowledge of Talon operations isn't exactly thorough."

Genji replies without a beat, "What makes you think the Shimada-gumi never did business with Talon?"

Torbjörn's raises one bushy brow as Reinhardt leans over his knee. "If that is true," the crusader rumbles, "That means that brother of yours worked with them personally?"

"It was a very long time ago. That life is behind both of us now."

Cole speaks up fast, "Anyway, he's right. Talon'll try anything to get the jump on us. Any means necessary."

Reinhardt sits up straight, looks down at his hands, then gives Cole a sympathetic yet stalwart gaze.

"I do not wish to say this, Cole, but someone must."

"Lay it on me, big guy," Cole drawls, coiled as a cat.

"There is a chance that this Talon and Blackwatch connection goes back much further than your encounter on the hyper-train. It is highly possible that Blackwatch was infiltrated by Talon long before the explosion at Geneva, starting with Reyes. Do you have any opinions on that?"

Cole reaches to adjust his hat, but it isn't there -- he left it by the door. His squinty eyes scan the room.

"Y'all think that way?"

"It is nothing personal against you, Cole," Angela says softly, "We all know that you would never be involved in something like that. Did you not leave specifically because of --?"

"Why I left is my own goddamn business," grunts Cole, immediately realizing that it's the wrong words and the wrong tone. "Y'want my opinion on that theory? It's just as bullshit as assuming Morrison was taking Talon money from day one. Y'got no evidence and no --"

"Blackwatch was not a faultless agency, Cole," says Torbjörn. "All those unscrupulous black ops were exactly what put us under in the first place!"

"And who was pulling the trigger on those ops?" Once again, Cole's accent grows thicker in his mouth. "Don't go accusing my commander without remembering yours."

"We are not accusing anyone!" says Reinhardt, remaining firm. "We are simply asking if you know anything that we do not. As it is, we are well within reason to assume that Talon infiltrated Overwatch long before any of us were aware, and if your instincts about their maneuvers are true, that corroborates it. They may be working on a plan to sabotage our next mission, like they did in Russia."

"That," Torbjörn scratches his brow, "Or they've already got a bug on the inside: technological or… personnel."

Cole glowers at Torbjörn, who takes his time in meeting his gaze. Quiet falls over the room, no one really looking at each other, save Hana and Lúcio -- they stare at the gunslinger with total incredulity.

Cole can play dumb because it's what people expect. They hear the accent, look at his cheap clothes, see the indiscernible heritage and realize that he's got no name that they should know. Even when he was top of the hot-shit-heap in Deadlock, he was nobody to the real world. No one ever broke their back trying to get into his good graces. No one ever pretended to be his friend so they could get something in return. He can't help thinking that, were circumstances otherwise, they all might've listened to someone like Hanzo.

Then the archer's words flash through his mind:

You are rōnin *, Cassidy.*

What's that?

A samurai with no master. You have been taught well. You have skill and bravery. But you have no one to serve.

Can’t agree with you there, Shimada. I’m serving Overwatch. Been serving Overwatch for the better part of my life.

I do not think so.

Y'don't, huh?

No. You left Overwatch a long time ago, and no one can ever truly go home. You have no one to serve but yourself.

Cole lifts his squinting eyes to Torbjörn. He’s never not felt like an outlaw. Now he can’t skirt the impulse to act like one.

“Y’think I’m a Talon spy, Torb? S’that it?”

Torbjörn seems taken aback. “That’s not --”

Cole rises to his feet and starts unbuttoning his shirt. “You wanna pop open my insides and take a look around?” He spreads the tails, takes a step towards the bewildered engineer. “You wanna scan me for long-distance signals? Wanna toss my dorm, look for foreign comms?”

“Cole, come now, this is --”

“I’m right here!" Cole gestures to the entire room. "Easy target! Line up your shots if you're gonna take ‘em!”

“Put your shirt back on, mate, no one is saying --”

And then Cole shouts, but no one sees why.

Waspish black aircrafts have entered their airspace. Something detaches and flies for the cliff above their heads with a shrill whistle. The gunslinger whirls around to throw himself over Hana.

BOOM .

The entire rock shakes. Holoscreens crash to the floor as shattered glass flies in with the wind. Cole reaches for his gun just as Reinhardt climbs through the blasted window, rushing to his suit in the lab’s adjacent bay.

Three black choppers hover around the comm tower like monstrous raptors. Talon agents are rappelling down taut steel cables to the launch pad below, hidden by the buildings. No less than twenty pairs of boots must be on the ground by the time red alert goes off.

“ *The hell --!* Is everyone okay?” Lúcio grabs his Sonic Amplifier from his back and slides the emitter to yellow. “How’d they -- don’t we have airspace radar?!”

Winston is already at his holopad, tapping into Athena's network as wind pushes equipment off shelves and empty peanut butter containers across the floor. "It's still up! She's been trying to warn us -- the emergency protocols have been altered!"

Then Athena's OWLS activate from every corner of the rock. They emerge like a horde of locusts and drone just as loud. Cole can see their omnicopter bodies zooming towards the Talon agents, firing their swirling electrodes by the dozen. Towers block his sight, but he can hear gunfire and the crackle of broken tech.

Then every single OWLS crashes to the ground and Athena's symbol fizzles on every screen.

"They're trying to shut her down!" Winston grapples up to his main office. "Stay with me, Athena!"

"Angie -- on me, love!" Lena zips up the half-tower towards the anti-aircraft gun. "Torb, see if you can set up a turret through Winston's window! Protect the drivers!"

Winston is roaring: "How could they -- only someone inside could have gotten access to this code!"

In the back of the dust storm that is Cole's mind, he wonders again about that serendipity.

Torbjörn is already clamoring up to Winston's level while the rest of the team rushes out the broken windows. Rocks tumble from the devastated cliffside, pepper their shoulders with dust and gravel. Cole grabs his hat, levels Peacekeeper and scales the shattered glass to the cracked tarmac below. He looks up -- a massive crater fractures the crag, huge fissures of stone ready to crush the lab with one more strike.

Hana summons her mecha just as Mei, Lúcio and a fully-suited Reinhardt bolt for the Talon agents. Cole makes tracks to join them, then suddenly skids to a dead stop.

Hanzo.

He whirls around, looking for: "Genji!"

The cyborg is already by his side. "Get Hanzo!"

They race for the eastern dormitory. Fueled by Lúcio's emitter, Reinhardt rushes the Talon troops head-on while Cole and Genji cut down a side-pass to avoid them. Blasting onto the catwalk above their heads is Hana, landing with catlike precision and shooting down with deafening automatic gunfire. Cole only looks back to watch Mei form an ice wall behind them, funneling the agents and blocking off any potential pursuers.

The shortest route is through an unused hangar: Genji climbs up and over the roof while Cole barrels straight through. He rushes through doors, slides over vehicles and cuts across discarded parts with the dwindling adrenaline of Lúcio's amplifier pumping in his ears. Through the bulkhead of a gutted plane, Cole can hear the bellowing anti-aircraft gun and the responding fire from the helicopters.

They should run into Hanzo before they reach the dormitory. Even if he isn't in his room, there's no way the archer didn't hear that blast. There's no way he wouldn't come rushing to his brother's side.

They regroup on the launch pad only to be accosted by a Talon aqua unit, still damp from their submersible. Cole throws down a flashbang from behind Genji, who deflects their fire with blindingly fast swipes of his sword.

Attacked from all sides, Cole's mind thunders. *This was months of planning.*

The gunslinger fans the hammer and ducks for cover. A shot goes off against a huge pressurized cylinder to his right and pounds his head with steam, like taking a hot bat to the skull. Genji leaps through the air to flank them, racing in between metal crates and disassembled aircraft like he has air in his bones. Cole's reloading when he sees a lone agent raise his sights to the cyborg, waiting for a clean shot.

"Genji!"

Something faster than a bullet knocks into the agent's head and down he goes.

Zenyatta is hovering on the shuttle's scaffolding, a loud whirring hum accompanying the appearance of more glowing black orbs. "I have you covered, my student."

"Go, Cole!" Genji advances on the remaining agents as they try to seek cover from Zenyatta's assault. "Find Hanzo!"

Cole vaults over his cover. Once he's almost clear of the launch pad, he turns, calls for Genji, tosses him his last flashbang and watches just long enough for the cyborg to deflect it right into one of Zenyatta's orbs. The subsequent explosion is enough to knock the gunslinger off his feet.

He can hear the crash of Reinhardt's ax, the *chug-chug-chug* of Hana's gun and Winston's rage-fueled roar. He might be wrong for running off like this. He might be wrong for not sticking with his team. He's been off the straight and narrow for so long, he's no longer sure where it starts. The only part of his mind that works well right now is the part that knows Hanzo's name.

They'll be fine. Cole pushes himself up. *We'll meet up and push them out together. We'll --*

BOOM.

He whirls around just in time to see the fireball rise where Lena shot down one of the choppers, causing it to crash into the comm tower. Everything falls -- the satellite, the walkway, the chopper -- tumbling over the brink and collapsing to the rocky surf below.

His right eye starts throbbing along with his gut, localized around the flaring turquoise lights. Gibraltar is burning up in the wind; from paradise to pure hell in two minutes flat.

She'll come back from this . Cole takes his gun and keeps moving. *We'll all come back.*

The eastern dorm codes have been changed. Cole punches the control panel with his metal hand, yanks out the wires and the entrance opens under red sirens. He rushes in as Athena's voice calmly echoes from above: *Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert.*

He takes the service stairs two at a time, spurs jangling. His heart jumps around in his chest through the red-lit corridor. He shoots the mechanism that controls Hanzo's door and kicks it down.

Nothing.

There isn't just no Hanzo -- there's no *anything* . The archer didn't have much by way of possessions, but the only sign that Hanzo was ever there at all is the rock Mei brought him from the cliff, still displayed on the dresser in a patch of crimson light.

Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert.

A black holopad rests on Hanzo's perfectly-made bed. Cole thinks he knows what it will say before turns it on. He's wrong.

'Do not follow me.'

Cole drops the holopad to the floor. He lowers himself to the edge of the bed.

Even though there's no door, and there was never any mirror on it, Cole looks at the exact same spot. Torbjörn's words flash back to him through the red.

Another voice, unaccounted for: *just how much of an easy target were you, cowboy?*

His metal hand shakes at the center of his still-exposed chest. Inside his right eye, the pupil dilates to a speck, and a trickle of blood pools along his tear line.

Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert.

Chapter End Notes

The Swedish drinking song the team sings and the song Cole sings.

This is where I should probably mention that there will be no major character deaths, no ending in which the main pairing do not wind up together, and no sad ending overall. One of the downsides of posting chapters like episodes is that you have to wait for the plot to unfold! Rest assured that most of your questions will be answered soon.

ALSO probably a good moment to remind everyone that this fic makes use of the Unreliable Narrator: Cole and Hanzo (and all the other characters for that matter) have prejudices that are based on their own individual beliefs and life experiences -- conclusions they come to may not necessarily reflect Objective Reality!

Cole's metallic body parts/heavy scarring are partially inspired by Vash the Stampede from the anime show Trigun (as well as other cybernetic characters).

Thanks to all of you for reading! Your comments give me life.

NEXT UP: Where in the world is Hanzo Shimada?

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Hanzo resumes the patterns of his Exile on the other side of the world, but certain images won't leave him alone.

Chapter Notes

This chapter represents a departure from the previous chapters in a lot of ways. We're leaving Gibraltar and entering the greater world of Overwatch. You could almost think of this as the start of a "Part II."

Also, I've found it helpful to continue working on about ~20k word 'episodes' at a time, so this chapter will be followed by another chapter that is also from Hanzo's POV.

Warnings: alcoholism, prostitution/sexual content, blood and violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Got a head full of lightning, a hat full of rain...

—Tom Waits

The garden is designed to look undesigned. Every landscape is meant to evoke the untouched forests of ancient Japan; an exercise in fashioned chaos. Just off the gravel path, ginkgo trees burst through the plush lichen floor in randomized spots. Pine needles are trimmed into waves around knobbled brown limbs. Bundles of lily pads blanket the olive-hued pond where

mossy stones accommodate white egrets. Ishi-dōrō *linger in the shadows, their umbrella-like hats slathered with green algae. Red bridges carry Sunday visitors from one knoll to the next, all enshrined within the castle of Mayumi's dear friend, the sister of the Prime Minister, whose name she cannot recall. It's been awhile since they needed each other.*

Mayumi takes her eldest son's hand and points to the passerine birds zipping through the camellia trees. She asks him to identify their families, but he gets a few mixed up. His attention has wandered across the pond to a great pavilion, where children are cooing at the jewel-like koi *below.*

Tugging him gently, she presses: "Hanzo. You're so distracted today. Are you nervous about the concert? Do you feel prepared?"

"Yes. I'm studying with Idane-sama tonight."

"You have chosen Vivaldi, yes?"

"Yes. I'm adapting 'Winter'," he says, though a completely different tune is stuck in his head. She can hear him humming it as he swipes his fingers through the grass on the stone walls. He grabs, tears, and drops ruined blades in his wake.

"And what do you think of Vivaldi?"

Hanzo shrugs. "I don't really care about the piano."

"But you know why you play, right?"

Hanzo glances up at her, then drops his eyes to the stepping stones. He solemnly quotes an axiom about hard work and diversification. It's one from his late uncle, Mayumi's eldest brother. The man was an expert swordsman and prolific writer, but Hanzo never knew him. He never knew any of Mayumi's three older brothers; the eldest killed the youngest, the middle killed the eldest, and the middle died by an assassin's blade. All before Hanzo was born.

Mayumi lets him pull on the grass and hum his tune while she regards the maples. They look lovelier than ever this year -- burgundy, like old blood.

She hears Rie before she see her; that haphazard giggle couldn't come from anyone else. A group of young women emerge from the crowd like a row of animated blossoms, Rie central among them, sparkling in the dappled leaf-shadows. She is dressed to match the tangerines she and her friends carry in little mesh bags. One of them rolls around like a ball in her hand as she and her friends laugh, knocking into each other and swaying on their expensive heels. As if all of spring were a party thrown in their honor.

Hanzo swings his arms, buzzing with barely-contained energy. "I can go to the dojo with Katsu-chan after piano, right?"

Mayumi looks down at him. “Do you recognize those women?”

He smiles at the prospect of a game. With quick and furtive glances, he analyzes the group. “The middle woman is Kitamura Rie, youngest daughter of the Amaya family, wife of Kitamura-sama. Father loans through the Kitamura-gumi’s firm. The middle-right woman is --"

“And when did you last see Kitamura Rie?”

Hanzo hesitates, confused. He turns his scan onto his mother. “The embassy dinner.”

“And what did you see?”

He frowns straight ahead. His words come out staccato, *and carefully crafted: “She arrived late. She greeted the ambassador. Visited every table. Talked to father. Suggested a game with the ambassador, he accepted. Talked to father again. Gave him one of the cakes. After the dinner, Onishi-san suggested they all go out to a bar and she was in their car.”*

Mayumi lowers her gaze so that her eyes disappear under thick lashes. “And who else was in that car?”

“Onishi-san. Endo-san and his mistress. His bodyguard. And father.”

Rie’s voice pierces through the crowd, enters their sphere of focus:

"Eyyyy, Sango! Get your own tangerine.”

“You haven’t even eaten one yet.”

“I can’t get it open!” Rie giggles, feebly running her long nails up the pebbled skin. “These new breeds are so pointless. It won’t even peel. How are you supposed to --!”

“You’re not even trying!”

“Yeah, I am -- look! I don’t want to break it and get juice all over.”

“Use your nails *, Rie-chan. Shit.”*

“Look, I just got these nails done, I’m not --“

A light touch spins Rie around until she's face-to-face with Mayumi. The other women go still.

“Shimada-sama,” Rie bows her head, eyes scanning the path, “I did not see you...“

Mayumi demonstrates a pitying smile, but quickly replaces it with something more genial.

“Good afternoon, Kitamura-san. You are looking well.”

“As are you, Shimada-sama." Rie makes quick glances between Mayumi and Hanzo, then looks at the ground. "And your handsome son.”

Mayumi reaches out with her own long nails: blood red, like the scales on her tattoo. “May I?”

Rie hesitates, then slowly extends the tangerine. Mayumi takes it with a light plucking motion.

Then she reaches into her dress and snaps out a four-inch switchblade. “I’m so glad I ran into you today. I wanted to thank you for attending the embassy dinner.” She draws the edge softly around the middle of the tangerine and the skin parts like butter. “You were a great asset to the gathering.”

“It was my honor.” The blade bounces sunshine into Rie’s widened eyes.

Mayumi works the knife around the fruit, turning it in her opposite hand. “I believe our husbands will be at the summit on Thursday. They’ve both been working so hard." She pushes the blade under the skin with steady swipes. "I have all of Kitamura-san’s travel records from their trips -- heh, he’s in that private jet more than he’s in his own house, isn’t he?”

The women emit weak giggles, as if not knowing whether or not they should. It’s certainly expected that Rie’s husband should spend more time at work than at home, but Mayumi seems to think there’s something funny about it and no one wants to disagree. Or, at least, to be seen disagreeing.

This is what Hanzo gathers, anyway.

Mayumi flicks her wrists and removes the top half of the tangerine’s skin in one quick gesture, leaving the bottom in a perfect bowl. She lets the loose spiral of rind fall to the ground by Hanzo's feet.

“Would you like to help me with preparations for the summit gala? It will take a lot of sharp eyes to make it a success." Mayumi offers the fruit back to Rie. "We won’t be able to enjoy the party as much, but," the flat of her knife rests against the apple of her smiling cheek, "Hard work is its own reward. And I would deeply appreciate your assistance.”

Rie accepts the fruit as slowly as possible, as though she is reaching into a snake's basket. She bows again, though not as low -- she cannot take her eyes from Mayumi’s knife. “I would be honored, Shimada-sama. Thank you.”

One of the other women, by far the oldest, breaks the tension with a wry tone: ”what a unique way of eating tangerines. Your technique certainly is something, Mayumi-sama.”

Mayumi smiles as she slips the switchblade back into her dress. Her own bow is also a good-bye: a smooth rise and fall. She takes Hanzo’s hand and turns them back towards the path.

In the back of his mind, Hanzo quotes the second half of his late uncle's axiom: that is the Shimada way.

- - - デ═一 - - -

The train car rattles over steel tracks suspended fifty feet above the rocky hills. Ancient plastic cushions seat dozens of travelers, each swaddled in their own unique world, occupied with their own mental arrivals and departures: elders with packaged snacks and homemade coffee, young men and women with loud music and conversation, children with whatever toys they could carry and their own imaginations. Hanzo watches two boys argue beneath inspection posters that are at least fifty years old. Even the stained flooring is made from a material too outdated to name. It's as if a godly hand had plucked the train from an ancient subway, set it upon new tracks, wound it up and let it go.

It's one of many just like it: the Silk Road Project, a new transit system of both elevated and subterranean trains that cross the eastern continent from Istanbul to Shanghai. Unlike the high-speed rails of Japan or North America, these were built fast and cheap -- a much-needed mode of low-tech transportation that its builders hoped would go ignored by omnic insurgents. *So far so good* , Hanzo thinks, gazing out at the passing steppe. He once read that hardly anyone believed it would survive for very long (the Crisis was at its apex and the lowest bidder recycled every bit of tech they could find), but here he sits over thirty years later, clattering ever-faster towards the rising sun.

It's another piece of a world whose only concern was survival, the sort of haphazard urban endeavor that would've made a younger Hanzo turn up his nose. He used to prefer the open wilderness over the war-scarred shreds of civilization, but has long since been drained of such prejudices; no one belongs on that vessel made of debris more than Shimada Hanzo.

Scarred fingers turn a yellowed page. Over the brim of his book, he can just see the lights of glittering Mashhad at twilight, the golden domes and steeples haloed by a bright lavender sun. He wishes he could get out to explore, but this train will not stop until Turkmenistan. Another time, perhaps -- whenever he is not compelled towards Hong Kong.

Pretending to be occupied with the view, he notices the woman at his left sneaking another glance. She's been doing that for the past half hour.

Quickly, he runs a personal inventory: his outfit isn't different from any of the other hard-pressed travelers (old leather jacket, some olive-drab PT shirt he'd found at Gibraltar, dark *gi* pants that tuck into his leg enhancements). That tech might be worth stealing, but nothing about Hanzo says 'easy mugging.' Storm Bow is locked in a case above his head along with

his quiver and a few clothes -- well-disguised as a cello case, nothing to attract attention. His body is slumped from days of sleepless travel, but Shimada castle will crumble to the ground before anyone mistakes him for weak. He cannot find a single factor that would explain her interest.

Unless, by chance, she recognizes him from his old life.

As soon as this thought occurs, she catches his glance, and smiles. “That book looks interesting. What is it?”

He turns his head to scan her properly: slightly younger, slightly shorter, and Turkish -- she wears a T-shirt from one of their national football teams, which he only knows about because he once listened to Lúcio complain about them for two days straight. Her accent, however, is difficult to trace.

His own voice is rough with dehydration. “The letters of Seneca.”

“Ooo. Who’s he?”

“A philosopher.”

“Ahh. What is it about?”

“...Philosophy.”

“What kind of philosophy?” she grins, fully aware of how much she is bothering him.

He lowers his book. “Are you a student?"

“Oh,” she folds her hands, “No, I am not. Wish I still was, sometimes. Are you?”

“No." He lowers his gaze respectfully. "I read whatever I find.”

“Me, too. I am always wondering about the books that people read on long train rides. It has got to be something good, right?” She pushes her mass of russet curly hair out of her face, gesturing like someone trained in public speaking. “You do not want to choose some four-hundred page epic that will bore you worse than the passing desert. Not when that is your only other option!”

Hanzo dog-ears his page and keeps the book in his hand as he crosses his arms, regarding her through weighted eyelids. “I suppose not.”

“It is interesting! Now that I have said it, you’ll notice the books more and more. Would you like one?” She takes out a box of cigarettes. “If I smoke one with someone else, I don’t feel as bad.”

He hesitates, but accepts. “Thank you.” He takes out a matchbook to light both.

“You use matches? Old-school.”

“Many hotels and restaurants offer free matchbooks.” Hanzo shows her the label -- *Royal Olympic Hotel: Ilios, Greece* . “I always take one.”

“You get around a lot, huh?” The woman suddenly squints with embarrassment and taps her forehead with her long nails. “Ah, I am sorry. Too tired to be polite. My name is Nesrin. What’s yours?”

He considers lying to her. It would be wise, given his newly precarious situation. But, he decides, if she's truly worthy of suspicion, he'd rather deal with it in the open air. *Let them come. I could always use the practice* .

“Hanzo.”

“Nice to meet you, Hanzo. Thanks for talking to me. I get antsy on these long rides!”

His eyes trail up to the luggage rack above her head and then smoothly back down. Only one bag: a cheap and overloaded briefcase. He brings the cigarette to his mouth. “What do you do, Nesrin?”

“I’m a digital archaeologist. I scour the old net for artifacts, pieces of the past I can convince museums to showcase. Hard to do when everyone can just call up whatever they want on their holodeck, but, I haven’t had to live under a bridge yet, so…”

He exhales smoke with a low sound to indicate he is listening, which he is. He’s just also watching, waiting -- trying to predict what kind of shoe is about to drop. It isn't much different from his usual *modus operandi;* it took him weeks at Gibraltar to drop his guard, and even then, only in spare moments. Some of which he regrets.

“I am headed to Shanghai right now for a convention.” Nesrin takes a rapid drag, then gestures to him. “What do you do?”

He seems to consider her question very carefully, those heavy lids lifting just enough to show the bloodshot of his eyes. “I am a businessman.”

“Oh yeah? What kind of business?”

“Acquisitions. Real estate. Stocks.” His mind carries on the list that his voice leaves out: *protection, arms, drugs...*

“Wow. Little of everything?”

“ Mhm .”

“That *is* cool. You married?”

“No.”

“Me neither. Never really had an interest. Where are you headed?”

His eyes narrow before dropping to the floor. She's cute, but doesn't seem amorous, nor overtly invested in getting him to open up; he imagines he could ignore her and she'd merely transfer this bubbling curiosity to the person on her opposite side. If she *is* an assassin, this is an odd way to go about it -- though many assassins have seemed, to Hanzo, akin to serial killers in their compulsive friendliness. Something about professional murder makes for convincing acting skill. Suppressing any natural emotion means you have to fake the rest, even the good ones.

Such company you keep , chirps a familiar voice in his head.

He sighs through his nostrils. "Hong Kong."

"Oooo, I love Hong Kong! You have to go see the giant Buddha. And go to the top of Victoria Peak!"

"I have seen the Buddha. Not the Peak."

"You *have* been around." Nesrin laughs through her teeth, a little hiss. "Business or pleasure? Business, right?"

One corner of Hanzo's mouth draws upwards into a slow smirk. "Do I look like I need a vacation?"

"Yes," Nesrin snickers, poking him right on the chest. "It's great, though! I am always jealous of workaholics. They actually get stuff done."

He uncrosses his arms and half-turns towards her. "You must work hard to be an archeologist."

"Noooooot really," she shrugs, grinning, "I mean, it *was* hard. But digital archaeology is kind of the irresponsible baby of the family. No one respects us. We just seem like we're having fun all day. This one man in my graduating class, you would not believe, he's got --"

A fearful cry from the far end of the compartment draws both Nesrin and Hanzo's attention.

"Nobody panic. Nobody move."

Seven men have entered the car, each armed with outdated assault rifles: three omnics, three humans, and one guard held hostage.

"I *said* nobody move." One of the omnics juts his rifle into back of the guard's head, sending him to his knees. The leader's auto-tuned voice glides erratically across a lilting scale, a salesman's cadence; Hanzo guesses he was originally built to deal with human clients. "If no one moves, no one dies. Simple." Two of them walk ahead, pointing their guns at terrified passengers. A tremorous silence grips the entire car. "Take out your valuables and this'll all be over quick."

One of the omnics, a blue kaleidoscopic flower etched into his ivory chest, passes Nesrin and Hanzo. The archer notices the ash flakes from her cigarette, her hand is shaking so badly. He

turns his own eyes to the ground. Then he opens up the book under his arm and flips the page.

The gang seizes jewelry, phones, holopads-- whatever looks valuable, which isn't much. Hanzo imagines they must be pretty desperate to rob people this poor. Most of their haul consists of medical apparatus: the sleek hearing device off a child's ear, the light-emitting steel cuff from an old man's arm, the Vishkar-white collar off a gaunt woman's neck...

As the omnic with the flower passes Nesrin again, he looks down at Hanzo, who does not look up from his book.

"Hey, asshole." He lays the barrel of his rifle on the pages, nudges the muzzle against Hanzo's chest. "Are we boring you?"

Hanzo glances up, the cigarette still jutting over his bottom lip. "You are now that you have my attention," he mutters, slipping the book down and re-folding the dog-ear.

The omnic lets out a short, scratchy digital laugh, as if it lost something in compression. "Cute." He scans the luggage rack above his head. "Whatcha got up here?"

Then he puts his hand on Hanzo's bow case.

A flick of the wrist, a tug on the omnic's shoulder, and he's falling to the ground with an arc of weak lightning. Nesrin screams; a six-inch blade is sticking out of his chest.

The rest of the gang whirls around. One of them tosses the guard into a seat. One of them shakes almost as badly as Nesrin. All raise their weapons at Hanzo, who is on his feet and removing his jacket.

He drops it on the seat before he digs his heel into the sparking omnic and yanks out his knife. People are clamoring towards the back of the car, running from gangsters: human and omnic and yakuza alike.

The omnic leader raises his gun just as Hanzo flips the blade, catches it, and flings it into the omnic's lens socket. Electricity shudders through the crackling joints, dances up the knife and sparks across the rusted railings as the others take aim at Hanzo.

But the archer is already too close. He uses the limp body of the omnic leader to block their fire, which is sporadic and hesitant -- he quickly realizes that they don't actually want to kill any passengers. *That makes things easier.*

He shoves the omnic leader into the closest human gangster, who stumbles enough for Hanzo to grab him, spin him around, and let his manic shots take out the last omnic.

Hanzo snaps the man's neck, dives for a dropped rifle and brings the butt up into the next man's chin. He falls like a sack of bricks.

The remaining gangster drops his weapon and runs from the car, yanking open the doors and letting them slam shut as he races up the next corridor.

But Hanzo picks up his rifle, aims through the windows of the sliding doors, and squeezes the trigger.

Nothing happens. Hanzo looks down at the gun and checks the magazine: it's jammed.

The weapon falls to the ground with a clatter. Hanzo looks down at the guard, still cowering on the bullet-holed seats.

He speaks low and clear: "You should tell whoever's still alive to go after him."

The guard shouts into his radio as Hanzo rolls his shoulder and returns to his seat. The compartment erupts into crying children and frantic adults. A woman identifies herself as a doctor and rushes to those who seem close to panic attacks or worse. As soon as Hanzo sits, Nesrin stands, taking her bag and heading further up the corridor. Hanzo reaches for his phone, ignores the missed calls and pushes in his ear buds. Only Vivaldi speaks to him for the rest of the ride.

- - - デ═一 - - -

Rain does beautiful things to downtown Hong Kong. It veils and merges with glowing advertisements to make neon blood; it drips off rooftops and glossy umbrellas, runs through gutters and cracks in the street, turns potholes into upside-down worlds. It bounces off glass skyscrapers, chromed hovercars and the spindly limbs of commuting omnics. The storm-drone softens a constant chorus of car horns, emergency sirens and buzzing crowds. It merges with steam from the sewers and smoke from the food stalls, creating candy-colored vapor from which anything could emerge -- any culture, any face, any manner of modified body or mis-tuned mind.

Hanzo pulls the hood of his jacket over his head and does nothing but wander for a few hours. He is grateful to stretch his legs, soak in the damp air, expand his senses as far as they will go. Already the smell of street meats and harbor water greet him like old friends. Already he can feel the rhythm of urban life sinking back into his bloodstream: speed, ambition, ruthlessness. In some ways like Tokyo, in some ways not at all.

When he's finally ready to rest, he searches through nigh-inaccessible alleyways to a *tau lau* : a triangular tenement building with a gift shop at the bottom, situated on the street corner of a sleepy residential neighborhood. There's no name outside -- just the pink neon address,

57821 . Silken plants drape from the barred windows and electric wires run like spider webbing up and down the apartments above and around. The only people on the streets are residents returning home after a long day at work. It's calm and innocuous and just the sort of harbor Hanzo needs.

But he still scans everything. He looks so hard at his environment that he feels zoomed-out -- somewhere above his own body. He watches himself leave a fake name with the landlady. He can practically see his own bowed head and polite words while simultaneously memorizing which rooms have occupants from the key rack behind her. He absorbs her cool courtesy, an attitude he asked for with that exposed tattoo. He watches himself follow from a respectful distance as she leads him up narrow stairs and bamboo curtains to his room. He slides back into his body as she offers a brusque bow and gives him his key in a way that does not require their hands to touch.

He places Storm Bow in a spot he can easily reach and inspects his surroundings. The room is long and rectangular with green glass lamps and peeling floorboards. There's a red couch and a gold-framed bed. There's a plastic table with two chairs and a small kitchenette that amounts to little more than a grease fire waiting to happen. There's a tiny bathroom with a toilet and a shower and hardly anything to separate the two -- someone must've figured that if the kitchen had a sink, there was no need to give the bathroom a second.

Hanzo walks to the window, where a tiny balcony overlooks a canal. Long boats drift past one at a time, swaying lamps glowing like fireflies through the fog. He makes note of the distance and proximity of balconies nearby. From his study of the key rack, he knows which rooms have occupants. He can hear a muted conversation through the wall behind his bed; a young couple are having an argument.

He makes instant coffee as he considers the ease with which an assassin could break in. The neighbors seem like the kind that prefer keeping to themselves -- the kind that does not readily call law enforcement. He knows how to leave no trail, but he'll have to be constantly vigilant nonetheless. At least he's certain no unscrupulous person could ever get past that landlady.

Except that you *did, right?* teases the voice, bright and avian.

As he drinks his coffee, Hanzo engages in a more thorough search of the room. He checks behind the cheap tropical painting over the bed. He looks under the overtaxed mattress. He dismantles the phone and shoves it into a drawer. He checks the overhead light, little more than a weak bulb in a tasseled paper lantern. He tests the chipped floorboards, pulls a couple edges to see if they come undone.

By the time he's taken his last sip, he's scratching at the baseboard that was hidden behind a dresser. After he pushes it back into place, he falls into one of the kitchen chairs and lets down his hair.

Just when he's finally ready to let the exhaustion take over, his gaze falls on his phone. It sits waiting between a vase of dead roses and a couple old Chinese pulp fiction novels. It's still stuck on Silent. With a grunt, Hanzo checks the log.

58 missed calls, but no voice messages or texts: typical Shimada power games.

If my voice is going to rattle around in your brain anyway, you might as well call me back.

Hanzo inhales deep and a groan falls out. With the building finally quiet and the caffeine lending a sense of urgency, he dials Genji's number and braces himself.

It picks up after one ring. Genji, in stark contrast to the lively voice in Hanzo's head, sounds like pure lead: "Brother."

"You're alive, then."

"No thanks to you."

"Well, when you call me 58 times, I'm expected to believe you're in imminent danger. Or else you've --"

"I *was* in imminent danger. We all were. Gibraltar was attacked."

Hanzo slowly straightens up. "What?"

"Talon attacked us, Hanzo. Choppers, ground troops… They deactivated all of our emergency defense functions. They nearly killed Lena -- she's still in med bay. Angela practically lost her mind trying to keep her stable. Now Winston is trying to keep her from disappearing altogether. The rock was heavily damaged. We barely fended them off. And you were *gone."*

Hanzo's eyes vibrate over the table as if he is seeing the Watchpoint from a war room, looking down at a holographic model of fire and dust. Little specks that represent the Overwatch team and their enemies. Frantic blue ants running from black spiders.

"Hanzo."

"Was anyone else hurt?"

"Not seriously. But they all think it's *your* fault."

"What?"

"Talon had information they only could've gotten from someone inside and you disappeared right before they attacked!" Genji takes a steadying breath -- Hanzo can tell he's not wearing his visor. "They asked me if I knew anything. I told them about our fight the night before."

Hanzo leans forward in his chair. "What did you tell them, *exactly?"*

"I told them the truth, *idiot* . I told them you came to my dorm asking why I'd hidden Cassidy's cybernetics from you, what else I was lying about. I told them you'd asked me whether or not I even wanted to reconcile at all, and that we argued, and that we stayed up all night talking."

A weighty pause. “Did you tell them --"

“I didn’t go into specifics. They don’t need to know every detail of our personal problems. But I *did* tell them we’d discussed the future, and I expressed… I told them that when we parted, you’d seemed resigned.”

“Genji.”

“What was I supposed to do, Hanzo? Talon knew exactly how to hit us and you left the night before their attack with nothing but a shitty note and zero good-bye’s! You didn’t even take all of your stuff! Your tea set, clothes, Mei’s rocks, Hana’s gifts, Cassidy’s movies… did you just pack your bow and your flask so you could abandon us all the faster, you fucking *reptile?”*

An icy blast of nostalgia freezes him in his chair; he hasn’t heard Genji speak like that in over a decade. It triggers an ire within him that has long lain dormant, ready to ignite with that specific spark. His little brother always did know how to press his buttons.

Under his breath: “You believe them.”

“I don’t know *what* to think! You don’t talk to me, Hanzo! I barely even know what you’ve been doing for the past ten years, let alone what you’re doing now! I don’t think you’ve been idle for a decade. I can’t imagine you *only* wallowing away your time drinking in every bar across the globe . You research, you strategize, you keep your plans to yourself until you execute -- that’s what you *do* . What am I supposed to think? I tried to… fuck, Hanzo, I really *tried* . You never opened up to me. All you said is that I would never understand. I thought, what if he just doesn’t *want* me to understand? What if he has reasons for keeping me in the dark?”

“So you think I’m a *spy?* For a terrorist organization? To what end? What possible motive could I --”

“I know you wish you could restore Hanamura.”

Hanzo’s voice locks in his throat.

Genji presses on, softer: “I know that you think, somehow, there’s a way to get it all back. Everything that you lost. Maybe even…” he sighs, hesitating.

Hanzo’s lip starts to curl over his fanged tooth. “Maybe *what?* ”

“Maybe you thought, after finding out that I was alive, that fate was trying to tell you something. That you still might have a chance to convince me. That there’s still a way to reclaim your old life.” Genji’s tone hardens and he talks faster, as if gaining steam, “And I know you don’t like Overwatch for what they made me --”

“What you continue to dismiss as my ‘old life,’” Hanzo glowers, a savage undertone creeping in, “I call my *birthright* . What you so easily scorn at every opportunity is *all that I am* . That is why I said that you will never understand.”

Then Genji's calm, 'enlightened' tone comes back like a flipped switch: “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I won’t.”

Hanzo grips the table's edge and listens to the deep, auto-tuned breaths passing in and out of his brother’s artificial chest. Genji is fighting for that calm. It reminds him to take his own breaths, to swallow his rage before he’s no longer able. The vitriol is so thick and tar-like in his throat that it’s a long moment before he’s able to say anything at all. He wishes he could cough it out.

Softly: “I am not a spy.”

Softer still: “I believe you.”

“Do you *actually* believe me, or are you clinging to some enlightened version of yourself that would *like* to be the type of person who *would* believe me?”

“Is there a difference? I want to believe you, Hanzo, so I do. But I already expressed this to Overwatch and they find it difficult to go on my word alone. They think I’m biased. You’re still a suspect in their book.”

The eldest leans back in his chair. Images of the entire team flash through his head, each expression more blackened than the last. Yet Cassidy's strong grimace isn't there -- his face is turned away entirely, expression unknown.

With a strong eye-roll, Hanzo mutters, “If they insist on pursuing this ridiculous line of inquiry, I will speak to them myself. Tell Winston to contact me. I will erase his doubts.”

Genji swears under his breath, a mixture of guttural sounds from which Hanzo can only discern one word: *arrogant* . “Overwatch has disbanded, Hanzo. ‘For the foreseeable future.’ Communications are on lockdown for our safety. Only Winston and Lena have stayed on base.”

“You’ve left Gibraltar?”

"Yes. They trashed the place, anyway. The comm tower is down, Winston’s lab --”

“Where are you?”

“I have returned to the Shambali with Zenyatta, where I'm going to stay until Winston deems it wise to regroup.”

“What’s the *point?* If Talon’s goal is to stop Overwatch, they could easily display evidence of its existence to --”

“Talon doesn't *know* that Overwatch will be met with the world’s contempt. They know what we know, but were too afraid to trust: that the Petras act may not be upheld. That we may have more support than we first thought. That there may be a hearing, or some legal action to reinstate Overwatch in the face of a potential second crisis. If they expose us now, they risk awakening our allies, and then we will not be so easy a target.”

Hanzo scratches his beard, his tone low and derisive. “Winston is worried about a hacker, yes? He said something to that effect, when we were talking about that Talon attack last spring. If his plan is to make them think that there is no organization left to hack, he’s going to have a hard time of it. If they broke into Athena’s program once, they can do it again. He should cut his loses and delete her. There are other AI that could --”

“I swear to God, Hanzo, you are all nickels and dimes. Athena is more than just an AI to us, especially to Winston. This is not a business equation. We are at war --”

“And *that* ,” Hanzo leans forward, “Is something else you never understood. Business is war, war is business. The same strategies apply, the same --”

“Yes, yes, your innate understanding of brutal tactics,” Genji sighs, that old careless hauteur over a volcano of rage; an infuriating shadow of Hanzo’s own brand of snobbery. “Spare me -- we don’t need your bloodied insights.”

The few remains of Hanzo's patience go up in smoke. “You were never *disparaging* when my insights brought you enough wealth to spread over every base neighborhood in Tokyo.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t *partake,* brother. You just had it brought to you. I did what I had to to keep my fucking head above water. You never even blinked an eye --”

“Never --?” Hanzo rears like a cobra, rising out of his chair, “How would *you* know? I couldn’t trust you with anything, let alone the details of what I was up against. I took *responsibility."* He stalks the room as his thoughts speed too fast to latch onto, a waterfall of glacial feelings, *"That's* what I’ve been doing for the past ten years, Genji: taking responsibility. And mourning you, and Takuya, and Masahiro... I did what I had to --”

“For the family. I *know.”* Genji barely contains his own snarl. “Believe me, I know.”

Hanzo's anger peaks and boils over. He pulls the phone away from his ear and knocks the vase against the wall, shattering green glass and dead petals everywhere.

Then he pulls the phone up again, but produces no words. Hot breaths push against the speaker but shape no meaning. Everything he might say to Genji is something he has already said, in some form, probably more than once. And Genji would take his words for what they would be: old script lines from a play in which he no longer wishes to act. More pieces that assemble a picture of the black-hearted sibling that took his life, the conservationist of a system from which he always sought escape.

He takes a scalpel to the silence with a half-whisper: “I can never make it up to you.”

Genji’s reply is just as careful: “I know that you want to. I know that, Hanzo.”

But Hanzo doesn’t believe him. He doesn’t even believe that Genji doesn't think he's a spy. Hanzo survived the clan through hard work and denial, but Genji survived through pathological lying -- to Hanzo, to their family, to anyone who might hinder his freedom. And Hanzo can’t blame him, never could. But he also can’t trust him, and that realization is pouring into his gut like coagulated poison.

The silence blossoms as both brothers cool their tempers. Hanzo walks to the balcony doors and looks down at the canal's black water. More than anything, he wants to be a different man. Someone who would have enough fresh insight to resolve a situation like this. Genji was right: all he has is incense. Adopted rituals to cajole his nature into more easily-controlled shapes. Something that his ancestors might recognize and respect. His thoughts are copies of copies of copies, centuries of doctrine and hours of hard labor, as sturdy and preserved as the *ishi-dōrō* at Hanamura's shrine.

"This is why I left, Genji," Hanzo mutters slowly, stilted, as if testing out a new language. "There is more I must do. I don't have the tools to… I can't do this by staying in one place, by having the same conversations. I need to... *do more."*

Genji takes his time to work out a reply. The breath of Zenyatta's guidance returns to his lungs: "we each have our own journeys, Hanzo."

Another, lighter silence.

Then, with his head resting on the doorframe, Hanzo mutters, "What about Cassidy?"

"Cassidy?" Hanzo can hear Genji's tongue click on the roof of his mouth. "What about him?"

"Where is he, now that you've all disbanded? Where was he headed?"

"How should I know? Just because we're brothers doesn't mean we're that close. I was a very hardened man when we worked together, and Cassidy wasn't much different."

"Fine. I'll message him."

"Oh, he's definitely ditched that phone. It would be the first thing he'd do. He knows how to disappear. Plus he's got that bounty on his head, remember?"

Hanzo recalls the details of the Blackwatch files he broke into. " *Hn* ."

"I wouldn't expect him to call you, either. He didn't say a lot, but he wasn't happy, Hanzo. I really think you made him feel like a fool."

"He'll get over it," Hanzo mutters, staying just enough inside so that the canal's water doesn't carry his voice. "There are more important matters."

"Like the war?"

"Your war, not mine."

"You are a soldier in this war whether you like it or not. I think you should remember that."

Hanzo rolls his eyes. "I was never a soldier. I was born a general."

"Ha! Wow, okay. Maybe you skipped a step."

"They're not different steps. They're different breeds. Wars need both."

“Whatever you say.” The younger brother sighs, exhausted, which might be a first; his energy on Gibraltar was constant. “But you know which side I’m on. Good luck with... figuring out yours or whatever.”

“I'll talk to you later, Genji.”

Click.

Hanzo drops his phone onto the red couch, tugs off his shirt, switches off the light and collapses into bed. He’s just able to make out a sliver of black sky from where his head touches the pillow, but it’s shrouded in light pollution, rendering it mauve -- it'll be a long time before he sees a star again. He reaches across the bed, grabs a pillow, and rests it over his eyes.

The fog rolls in through the balcony windows and creates enough of a chill to wake him. He rolls over with a growl and blinks rapidly at the clock on the wall: *3:27 am* . The blood throbs between his ears in a dull ache. Across from the bed, through the open balcony, he can see passing ghosts of light against the buildings on the opposite side of the canal -- refractions from the boats below, like a procession of spirits. He hears one of them blow a horn, like the steamers off Gibraltar, and then hears another too far away to place. He frowns like a fussy child, annoyed and confused: why would those small boats need horns like that?

He plays the sound with other contradictory memories until he can no longer trust their impressions, like a book handled too many times to bear another reading.

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Time blurs between the moment Hanzo leaves his room in the morning to when he returns at night. There’s no base to refurbish, no group meals, no shooting range to regulate his hours. He falls into the old pattern of his Exile: wake, meditation, training and exploration. He keeps his room in a specific order and leaves traps so that he’ll be able to tell if someone entered while he was gone. He masters the art of looking over his shoulder without actually turning his head. He speaks to as few people as possible. He cares for his body, though boils have popped up across his right forearm like angry red ant-bites -- some infection he must've

picked up on the trip over. He drinks, but not enough to slow his awareness; he is re-entering a dangerous world and the past is already too strong a soporific to encourage with liquor.

“Cigar, sir?”

He looks over his shoulder. An omnic in a red suit bows, his arm outfitted to balance an impressive array of rolled tobacco. Hanzo takes a Cuban from the box, pushes a bill into the omnic's front pocket and turns back to the sea. The junk boats of Victoria Harbor are covered, but wind and sun still pour in from all sides, sloshing waves and whipping his hair in its makeshift bun; he thinks of his golden sash and how he left it behind in the cave. The wind's probably taken it by now. Unless Cassidy picked it up and threw it in the trash.

Like an unexpected blow, the bright sun, mingling scent of tobacco and strong ocean wind lodges the cowboy permanently in Hanzo's mind. He wonders if Genji was right, if Cassidy really did feel a fool.

The he scoffs out a thick cloud of smoke: *ridiculous* . Genji doesn't know for sure how anyone else feels -- he's too wrapped up in himself, even with his new-found enlightenment. And if Cassidy *is* insulted, where does he get off? After all his deceptions, his slippery attempts to con Hanzo rather than immediately explain his cybernetics? What did Hanzo care if he was disfigured -- is he not also a fighter, does he not also understand the realities of battle? What else was he hiding? Did Cassidy never trust him at all?

Like a self-inflicted sting, he thinks of the man’s smoke-scratched confession on the autumn wind: *I’m real glad you wound up here, archer.*

Hanzo reaches under his aviators to pinch the bridge of his nose, muttering under his breath: *“stop.”* There's no point in this line of thinking. His flirtation with Cassidy was just another distraction, something to fend off boredom; just two criminal men of similar age and physical attractiveness finding momentary respite in shared drink. Nothing Hanzo needs, or couldn’t easily replace with something more fulfilling. And now that Cassidy is back out in the real world, he’ll find someone else -- in all likelihood, he already has. Multiple someones, no doubt.

But to think that Hanzo had played him for a fool? *It’s the other way around.* Hanzo cringes when he thinks of his behavior in the cave compounded with the Talon attack. Did the gunslinger think of it as just another drunken mistake? Does he truly believe, like the rest, that Hanzo is a spy?

Of course he does , the accountant in the back of his mind drones. *Even Genji isn’t sure who you really are.*

His buzzing phone knocks him from the past. He takes it from his pocket with a grunt, *“Finally,"* but the information makes him frown.

Rune:

Nothing yet, but it’s early.

Don’t worry, business has been

booming across the boards. Just

a matter of time.

Hanzo glowers, traps the cigar between his teeth, and types out a reply.

Hanzo:

You’ve contacted Fauré? Taki?

Mascagni?

It’s been two weeks.

This is unacceptable.

Rune:

And I’ve done everything I can.

They’ll get back to me if they hear

anything.

Can’t expect to jump back into the

game that fast. Even with your

reputation.

He casts his withering stare up and down the length of the boat’s upper deck, just to make sure no one is walking past his shoulders or eavesdropping from his peripherals. Red sails catch the wind with shimmering ripples of daylight while other passengers laugh, toast each other with sparkling mimosas and enjoy the spectacular coastline -- totally ignorant of the under-dressed man trying to find someone to kill.

Hanzo sighs smoke out through his nostrils and types, resigned:

Hanzo:

Let me know as soon as you

find something.

Rune:

Obviously. Altho I gotta say

I did think I would find you a Mark

sooner than this. You might have

someone trying to keep you out

of the game.

Hanzo:

Such as?

Rune:

Like a competitor? It's just a theory.

But I'll keep searching. There's a

party this weekend that I'm sure will

bear fruit.

Hanzo:

You have my resume.

Rune:

Pretty sure the grim reaper has your

resume, oyabun. Gotta run! Ciao

Hanzo frowns at the screen, but tosses his vexation to the wind, along with the cigar. Neither it nor the memories it brings are up to his standards.

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Bamboo scaffolding and hi-tech cranes tend to the skeletons of gleaming skyscrapers. Levels upon levels of construction workers, neon signs and pixelated advertisements all but blot out the sky. Glass walkways connect the more affluent buildings so that you needn't ever breathe city air from your trip to the organic grocer to Cartier's back to your own apartment, but the real action is happening on the ground: street markets full of holiday shoppers and unnameable life. Buzzing open light bulbs showcase shouting hawkers, pockets of fortune tellers and sight-seeing guides waving pamphlets for everything from ferry rides to helicopter tours. Cats skitter in-between stalls and unaware feet, elusive reminders of never-absent nature. More rain creates luminescent paint in every divot and channel. Musty steam turns the bulbs into multi-colored haloes and bodies into drifting phantoms, but Hanzo can still clearly make out Lúcio’s concert posters whenever he comes across them; apparently he's throwing a special Christmas concert in Rio.

Salt, soy, pork fat and fresh noodles; midnight ramen is an experience Hanzo will never pass up. He squeezes in between other rain-soaked tourists and slurps his meal down with relish, chases each savory bite with ice cold beer. Eternal good fortune on the proprietor who still manages to carry dry Japanese lager despite the increasing struggle for Hong Kong to honor its own products and heritage, free of the influence of outsiders and occupiers. It's not like he can blame them; Hong Kong has had a mixed identity for a long time. Now they have omnics to contend with as well.

As Hanzo leaves the noisy stall, using a toothpick to scrape seaweed from his teeth, he decides that it’s futile; good or bad, you can’t erase the past. Or maybe that's just the knee-jerk reaction of an old conqueror.

Dodging umbrella spines, Hanzo walks into a six-story shopping center only to have his senses immediately flooded with a rainbow-vivid overload of sight and sound. It’s like taking a guided trip through a commercialized theme park: tunnels of ultramarine vortex light, windows full of tech and couture and tech-couture, floating holographic crystals in lieu of chandeliers. Humans and omnics alike beckon to display cases full of diamond watches and leather bags. An actual giant robot draws the young and young at heart into a three-story

arcade. Ambient dance music with no beginning nor end lets his mind free-float from place to place without direction nor purpose, but he very quickly puts a stop to that. He's in there for one reason only -- to buy a new suit. Re-entering his old profession will mean many changes, starting with his appearance; no one trusts a poor assassin.

The omnic who takes his measurements doesn't mind that he smokes. He doesn't say much of anything -- just runs his laser-sights up and down Hanzo's lengths and sends the information to the machines in the back. The archer remembers his father's old tailor, who later became *his* tailor, and how the man never said more than two words during each and every fitting. He remembers the severely wrinkled hands, full of needle scars and ink stains. He remembers how the man and his associates would work for weeks on a single suit and present it with great ceremony to the Shimada men. Now that work is done in mere hours by metal components that don't even resemble human hands. Hanzo wonders if the tailor's sons are still carrying on the business or if it has fallen by the wayside, another victim of the future.

As the omnic presents him with a number of color options, Hanzo also wonders if it sensed that he wasn't in the mood to talk. They're getting better at reading people all the time.

Glass walkways over the traffic-packed roads allow 360 degree views of stunning holo-ads and digitized commercials, a spectacle of spatial optics, but Hanzo has had enough visual stimuli for one night. He pulls up the collar of his new raincoat and takes a side-street to the cramped and ancient alleys, where some shops still have wooden doors and towering apartments grow so close together you could easily toss a ball between windows. He munches a stick of curried fish balls and washes it down with whiskey from his flask. Pink mist turns to hot magenta as he makes his way further downtown, past his hotel, past the threshold of general tourism. The graffiti gets more political and the omnic-focused shops more frequent; you can have your cover modified in all kinds of ways while enjoying a glass of organic oil, or get your chassis adjusted while someone coats you with water-displacing polish. As long as you have the money, the city will provide, human or otherwise.

As Hanzo rounds a corner, he comes upon a familiar outline of a purple neon octopus and has to stop in the middle of the road. He looks back over his shoulder, then directly at the sign. The mist can't hide his embarrassment at the dawning realization -- he's been on this same street before, years ago, right after he'd left the Shimada-gumi for good. He'd even taken the same path.

He shakes his head and lights up a cigarette under the octopus house's awning, metallic chimes still and silent beside. His free hand rubs at the center of his chest in idle circles. His mind isn't grasping for exploration, he thinks; he wants the familiar. Something comforting, like ramen or a new fitted suit. A distraction from problems he can do nothing about.

Luckily, he has enough money to get what he needs. He steps back onto the street and heads further south, where the fog drifts thicker.

The red light district hasn’t changed much, but neither has Hanzo. He knows what kind of venue to look for, how to greet the woman in charge; how to show his wealth without opening his wallet, how to hide his tattoo and emphasis the gangster-like cadence of his natural accent. He knows what to ask for and how to ask it, doesn’t need a catalogue or a sales pitch. He knows the savvy mistress will be able to tell he’s an old player, knows she will not disappoint.

She sends a call through a doorway of light-beams and asks a woman if she is free. She meets Hanzo's eyes as soon as she enters the room. She nods. He nods back, asks the mistress to send a bottle of champagne, and is led by the hand up a spiral staircase made of illuminated plexiglass.

Her room is like a lava lamp, all swooning fuchsia with deep shadows and sparkles of white from rotating wall sconces. She leaves his hand to make sure the champagne is properly situated in a bucket of ice. It gives Hanzo a chance to remove his coat and look her over: her entire right arm is a prosthetic, chrome-black on the upper and translucent on the lower -- a fine piece of hardware. It matches her thick curls and gleaming brown shoulders. Her eyes are painted hot-red from brows to lashes, creating a stunning effect around her dark irises. She's even got spots of red on her chest and upper arms, like alien freckles. He'll never be able to keep track of the things young people find cool nowadays.

As she unties her sleeveless robe, he can see piercing bumps under her white-silk blouse, one on each nipple. She catches him staring and grins, revealing exceptionally pointy canine teeth. He points his own smile at his task: unbuttoning his shirt cuffs.

She walks towards him with a leonine sway and speaks in low, accented Chinese. “What do they call you?”

He doesn't look up. “Hanzo.”

“ *Haaaaahn* -zo.” Her voice carries like a wooden instrument. She walks up close, helps him loosen his tie; with a thrill, he notices that they are the exact same height. “I like it.”

“And you are… Tess?”

“Theresa." She tosses her hair proudly over her shoulder, vain and queenly. It makes him smile again. "I was named after a saint.” She leaves his tie on the floating coat rack and flicks open his shirt buttons, keeping her eyes on his mouth. “Named after anyone?”

“A relative.” Hanzo lets her peel off his shirt. “A very, very old relative.”

The infection on his arm has lessened, but Theresa runs a hand over the red marks anyway, makes a noise like she's soothing a wounded animal. She turns to hang up his shirt and Hanzo comes behind her, puts his hands on her waist, drags his teeth hungrily across her nape. She

presses back and he hisses at the soft, plush pressure. His hand snakes around. He pulls her in by the belly.

Then she turns, eluding his grasp, and pushes back his perpetually loose strand of hair. She unties his knot and sinks her fingers into the silky black strands, smiling at the way his thick lashes flutter closed. Then she steps aside, gestures to the floor near the foot of the bed, where there's a plush cushion for sitting and a long silver comb resting on a tray. "May I?"

Hanzo grunts, lowers himself to the cushion, and sits with his back against the low bed. Theresa sits on the edge, her thighs on either side of his head, and starts combing his hair. The comb is tinted with something he recognizes: oil from linden trees, something his nurse used to give it to him as a child to calm his tempers. Already he can feel the tension leaving his shoulders and upper neck, peace and arousal flowing down his body like dripping magma.

She's good , he thinks. She knew he'd love this from one touch of his hair.

After several strokes, Teresa replaces the comb with her own long nails. She massages him slow, caresses his temples, scratches his crown. He nods with her attentions until his eyes are rolling shut.

"You have lovely hands," he sighs.

"You have lovely hair. You're from Japan?"

"Mm . You?"

"Portugal. Lisbon."

Hanzo opens his eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. But I was born on Madeira, the island off the coast. Ever been?"

His eyes close again. "Once. They have excellent port."

"They do. My family made port wine for generations. My great-great-grandmother crushed grapes with her feet." Teresa rakes her blunt nails through Hanzo's hair until his jaw drops. "Have you been to the caves?"

Hanzo crushes his eyes closed beneath his brows. "I'd rather not talk about that."

"Fair enough. You get headaches?"

"Sometimes."

"I can tell. You tie your hair back too tightly."

"I need it out of the way."

"Why not cut it all off, then? You'd look handsome with a shaved head."

He hesitates. “It is customary in my family to leave it long.”

She knows what type of ‘family’ he’s from, knows to leave the subject alone. “Well, it's nice.” She leans over his shoulder and kisses the shell of his ear, all predatory confidence: “It’d look even nicer spread out on my white sheets.”

Hanzo snaps back in time without warning, is caught unaware by sense-images: Cassidy, buckling his knees and leaning against a wall, faux-clutching his heart after Hanzo dropped his hair from its sash and raked his fingers through. *Jesus Christ, Shimada* , he’d rumbled, *You really* are *tryin’a kill me.*

The rich purr of Cassidy's voice summons warm salty breezes through that cool pink room. Hanzo suddenly rises, crowds Theresa to her back and slips a hand under her blouse. She sucks in a breath and smiles up at the bed's canopy as he kisses her neck and inhales deep: expensive shampoo and sweet patchouli. He drags his hand down her steely forearm and finds it warm to the touch.

“Like it?” Inside her fingers are steel bones -- Hanzo can see bright blood flowing beneath her semi-translucent skin, matching the red of her painted freckles. “They use the vein structure of leaves to create the capillaries. Isn’t that beautiful?”

“It is.” Hanzo pulls up her thigh with one hand and touches her artificial fingers with the other. Embedded in the silicone-like material are unique fingerprints, required under national law for prosthetics. “Can you feel anything with it?”

She chuckles, as if his question were childish. “Not like my real arm does, but, yeah,” she strokes his hair behind his ear and Hanzo can hear the micro-circuitry whirring behind her wrist. “I can feel.”

He raises his head and gazes down at her with heavy lids. He goes in for a kiss, but her small lean tells him it’s not allowed. So he kisses her breasts instead, down her stomach, dragging his tongue before settling in between her thighs.

The fog has returned by the time he hits the streets again. He could call a car, but he likes walking through empty urban spaces, when party-goers and domesticates alike are indoors and out of sight. It feels like he’s walking through a movie studio backlot, all the imposing high-rises and shoulder-to-shoulder apartments just facades that could be torn down at any time. A world built just for him, apart from eyes and sounds and *ishi-dōrō* dreams .

But Cassidy still dogs his mind. He didn’t expect to think of the gunslinger at a time like that; now it’s hard to forget him. It’d be easy to dismiss as mere lust, another habit he falls back on to combat boredom and loneliness, except that the thoughts didn’t disappear after the sex ended. Now the man may as well be walking beside him, spurs echoing down the mist-touched street, an unwanted extra in this cinema of mind.

With a rough sigh, Hanzo lets the memories flow. It couldn't hurt, and he knows that they'll pass on their own if he doesn't fight them. *Anyway* , he reminds himself, looking up at the facade, *These memories are all I have. We'll never meet again.*

Hanzo has been walking for a good thirty minutes before he realizes that he's being followed. He can tell after he pauses his gait, looks into a dark shop window and then carries on; soft footfalls echo his own on the damp road. It's an expert, but it's there.

He doesn't look over his shoulder. He doesn't take a strange turn. He looks as if he is admiring the architecture, tracing his stare along power cables and leaky air conditioners. He takes a street that looks long and is bracketed only by very tall, very new buildings; the exteriors are sheer and would be difficult to scale. He takes note of the alleys as he passes them, waits until there are as few escape routes as possible.

He waits until he's at the end of the long street, then turns around and runs straight at his pursuer.

A man bolts from the shadows. He dives down the closest alley and Hanzo follows, shedding his raincoat as he goes. The steep stone steps are slippery and the assassin jumps the last five, landing hard and racing through a subterranean gambling den. Hanzo lands and rolls and keeps his jaw locked as he pursues.

Smooth-soled shoes are hell against the slick concrete. He leaps over a Go board and steps off a wall to fly across smoking grills. He chases through crowds of angry gamblers and sweaty street dwellers, dodging carts, ducking laundry. The assassin runs hard, pulls down tables full of cards and cash -- a whole basket of ice and beer bottles clatter across the street but Hanzo does not slow. People cry out and jostle to the side, trip over themselves and each other in the cramped alleyway as it grows narrower and narrower. A man slams into Hanzo's shoulder, sends his body spinning and his teeth snapping, but the archer uses the momentum to push off a suspended fish tank with a crash of water and cyan blue. He cannot let this man escape.

The assassin isn't even risking a look over his shoulder. He is younger and wily and Hanzo thinks he might just lose him if they run for much longer. The dragons stir beneath his skin but he can tell they're not hungry; they're just watching. They're always watching.

Then Hanzo sees the man race up a length of diagonal bamboo to the scaffolding above and something like relief injects into his bloodstream. He gets a second wind.

He jumps high, seizes a horizontal pole and yanks himself up in one fluid motion. The din below dwindles as they climb, faster and faster, the bamboo creaking and bouncing under their weight. The assassin is good -- an expert, no doubt -- but if there's one thing Hanzo is best at, it's scaling to the top.

There's a knife in his hand before he’s reached the roof and he's thrown it before his feet touch solid ground; a grunt, a stumble, and the assassin drops knees.

Hanzo walks up to him. He slaps his hand on the man’s collar and throws him into a steaming chimney. The lid breaks off and sauna smells hit the air as he yanks him back. He only punches once, but when he drags him up again, the man’s entire lower face is covered in a mask of gleaming blood.

Then Hanzo lowers himself into a deep squat. In Japanese: “Who sent you?”

Silence. Hanzo repeats the question in Mandarin. More silence. The archer rubs his beard, considering.

Then he pulls out the knife and tugs out the assassin’s garb so he can cut it open. Twin cranes dance across the man’s left pectoral, a tattoo Hanzo immediately recognizes.

“You’re from Asakusa.” He grabs the man by the hair to get his attention. “What could they possibly want with my death?"

In Japanese, the man snarls: *“fuck off.”*

Hanzo tears his shirt across and around, slashing fast but never nicking the skin. He searches until he finds more tattoos: a fresh black fish on the side of his ribs, an old red rooster on his left hip, a series of green kanji up his back.

“You’ve switched sides a few times," he drawls, shoving the man back. "You must be a very proficient traitor.” The knife rests below his own jaw. “Last time. Who sent you?”

“From one traitor to another,” the man chuckles, showing bloodied teeth, “You’ll *die* a traitor. Without your castles. Without your name.”

Hanzo taps the blade against his cheek. His natural glower is mixed with exasperation. Then he leans in and takes the man’s shoulder. “And what’s *your* name?”

Before he can answer, the knife swipes along the man's throat. Blood mingles with the oncoming rain. The assassin slumps forward and the archer rises.

He looks down at the body for a long time. None of it seems right. But then nothing has seemed right for a long time.

If anything, he should've left Gibraltar sooner.

Not wishing to return via the now-chaotic street, Hanzo makes his way across the rooftops. Cold rain pelts his new suit, sinks into his skin. He lets the water clean his blade and follows the powerlines back to the hotel.

Again, he wakes too early. The incense he'd lit for the dead assassin still mingles in the damp air. No boats drift by on the canal but rain is pounding the building. Hanzo growls and shoots out of bed so he can tire himself with mundane tasks: clean the sink, empty the ashtrays, work out on the peeling floorboards. He doesn't start counting reps until the sting in his muscles is nigh-unbearable, chases the ache like a high he can't catch. After that, the trip down to the basement laundry and back up feels like a martial pilgrimage.

He’s shaking out clothes to be folded when two small objects clatter to the ground in a familiar flash of turquoise light: Cassidy’s bullets.

Hanzo stares with the shirt still in his hands. Then he bends low, scoops them up and turns the bright circles in his fingers. Now that he knows for sure that Cassidy’s body is attuned to his weapon, he's surprised to see them still glowing, unchanged after so many days have passed. He tries to think of exactly how long it’s been, but to his additional surprise, he has no idea; time is running together. Losing its meaning.

He puts one bullet between thumb and forefinger and holds it up to the paper lantern's light. They do seem a bit dimmer, now that he looks close. The color has waned, darkened -- more like the electric blue of the dragons. A distant, cosmic growl echoes down the canal. It's nothing like the boat horns from before.

So Hanzo makes a decision. He puts the bullets back in his bag and starts packing.

As he drops off his key at the desk, his eyes catch a holo-photograph on the wall: a shot of the view from Victoria Peak, according to the frame. He laments not being able to see it. Maybe next time.

But a shadow crosses his frown when the first shower pelts his umbrella; 'next time' no longer feels like a given.

Chapter End Notes

Hanzo's Hong Kong tenement building number is a reference to Janelle Monae! Her ArchAndroid albums are great inspiration for Part II in general.

I also fashioned Hanzo's mother after Suz's incredible Mama Shimada art!

The quote at the beginning of the chapter is from a Tom Waits song, "Long Way Home."

ALSO, I realized I never linked to this very good and very beautiful fan art from CH2!! Thank you so much!!!!! Please note that I love fan art and it adds +2 years to my life, as well as makes me write approximately 539% faster.

NEXT UP: Hanzo continues his journey.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys enjoy this one! It contains one of my favorite scenes thus far. c:

Warnings: alcoholism, mention of suicidal thoughts, mention of... professional murder? He's an assassin Mary

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Omnics may be outlawed in the Philippines, but underground robot battles in Manila are still widely enjoyed. Obsolete parts, stripped of their AI and refitted with everything from race car engines to tank treads battle it out for a fat purse and their makers' personal glory. Fights are held in concrete caverns below the busy streets, built long ago to shield the population from typhoons and omnic attacks. City officials must've figured, as long as they aren't being used, there's no reason not to make a little money off the tourists.

Hanzo inhales car exhaust along with grease burns and acrid metal, stale beer and cheap fried foods, bad cologne and illegal smoke. It's sickly, yet enticing -- even addicting. He knows this world, though he was never much of a gambler. With nothing but time and blood money, he was bound to find something dangerous to spend them on.

Rune still hasn't contacted him and his impatience is getting explosive. He wasn't meant to be idle. Wasn't built for it. He imagines his *shinobi* ancestors, newly poor and unemployed, splitting their ample time between drinking and *sumo,* turning their murderous skills for profit because it was all they had to offer. Hanzo once considered doing something, *anything* other than assassination, but it was more than a matter of matching skills with work; he doesn't know how to give away control. He can't take orders, he can't serve anyone but his own legacy. Even his body is ill-equipped for following: his voice is too forceful, face too regal, eyes too challenging. Cocky from balls to brain. *Intense* was the politest word that Genji ever used. A single glare would get him fired on day one.

And since Hanzo has no one to discuss this with, he can be perfectly honest: he has no will to even try. He didn't work this hard all his life for nothing. He's not about to start at the bottom of yet another colossal mountain. Not when his skills as an assassin are without rival.

A pink-and-white streaked robot hammers away at a sleek green-and-gold opponent and the subsequent bashing rattles Hanzo's eardrums. He briefly tosses his mind about, trying to land on some higher pursuit to which he could turn his talents, but comes up short. *Pointless,* he thinks. *I'm too old to be born again.* Leaving the clan was hard enough; he can't leave what it made him.

He takes a beer off a passing tray like he's plucking it from the air and chuckles on the froth when his fighter sets the other down with 20 rounds to go. A decisive victory.

Then he locks eyes with another man across the aisle: a native, handsome and rich. With his indoor sunglasses and large entourage, he looks like a movie star -- acts like one, too, tossing Hanzo a blatant wink-and-grin.

The archer answers by holding his gaze and slowly drinking his beer. Then he turns towards the pit and doesn't look back. *Too young, too pretty.* Not nearly enough worldliness to even know what to do with someone like Hanzo.

And it's not like he could partake, even if he wanted to. The assassin in Hong Kong was a mercenary, so tatted up as to be virtually anonymous. News of Hanzo's re-emergence in the underworld had likely spread ripples to places he doesn't even know about. He caused enough devastation during his brief reign as *oyabun* to know that he has enemies throughout the world, enemies he isn't even aware of -- children of enemies, even. Nevermind those sent by the remains of his own family. Add to that someone plaguing his attempts to return to assassination and *everyone* is suspect. No amount of intimacy is worth the life of some unsuspecting civilian, no matter how pretty.

He's thinking of taking his winnings to a game of Mahjong when his phone vibrates against his chest. He pulls it out quickly, expecting Rune, but winds up frowning at a foreign number.

Then he opens the message and the entire cavern dissolves: sight, sound, everything.

It's a photo of Hana and Genji. The young soldier's iconic V-sign and his little brother's big grin. Hanzo's frown sends a sharp line up the center of his forehead, like cracking clay. His mind races out of control: who would send him such an image? How did they obtain it? What fresh threat is --

Then more images arrive, one after the other, all of them from Gibraltar. Hanzo's lips part as he notices himself in a few of them; mostly accidental candids, a few withering stares. One where he's actually laughing, Genji at his shoulder, both of their faces half-full of *japonesa* . One where he and Reinhardt are engaged in an arm wrestling contest. One where Mei is jokingly leaning against his back while Hana uses his lap as a footrest and Lena leans her elbow on his head -- all while he's clearly trying to meditate. Dozens of photos flood his phone, until he catches the ire of the people sitting around him from the constant alert noises.

He snorts out an unexpected laugh when he sees himself captured in a very familiar pose: fist raised, eyes wild, teeth bared in a moment of victory at the shooting range. The picture of ebullient, unguarded triumph. Only one person could've taken that photo.

Hanzo holds his breath as he types out a reply:

Hanzo:

Hello, Cassidy.

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The steel ship to Vietnam is a world away from the junkers of Victoria Bay, but Hanzo has to save money until his new contract is fulfilled. Since leaving the Philippines, Rune has (finally) been texting him, but he only answered the first two; making Rune believe that he is busier than he is is just another part of the game. He lights a cigarette from his deck chair and thinks back to hot summers in Tokyo's suburbs, when he and his few friends would hustle strangers just for a laugh, just for something to do in between whatever they *had* to do. Some left embittered. Some took it to the dojo later. It was good practice -- boys and girls growing up too fast, too rough, playing with guns and lies. Few took it personally. The honor of their family didn't ride on a win or a loss. Not yet, anyway.

The ship lets out a long blast through the night and is answered by another much further away. Hanzo exhales smoke and watches it eddy and rise, dissolving into the gray atmosphere. Only the soft yellow deck lights can pierce that unnaturally dense fog.

Until something much larger looms into view. He slowly sits up in his chair as he realizes: they're crossing the portion of the South China Sea that is littered with the bodies of Colossi omnics.

He strides up to the railing for a closer look. He knows that at least a dozen of these ocean-bred constructs were decimated by submarine and aerial missile attacks, but four stayed rooted just south of the deep basin. Now they jut from the surf like horrific channel markers. By the glow of the ship lights, Hanzo can just make out the approaching head and shoulder of an entirely unique machine -- something only another AI could imagine. If most omnics were designed to be familiar and even pleasing to human sensibilities, this was conceived for the opposite. Looking at it puts something heavy and chilling in even Hanzo's guts.

He also knows that there is a deep sea omnium hidden somewhere in the Pacific, recalls an article stating that satellite imaging showed increased electromagnetic activity in one of the many unnamed trenches. Multiple nations built an array of defensive protocols in response. Some scientists still postulate that the omnium is partially to blame for the increased climate irregularities throughout the world, but Mei did not support that theory. Hanzo recalls her ardent discussion at the party, keeping her voice low so as not to upset Hana. The omnium affects the young South Korean soldier more than anyone at Overwatch, but all any nation can do is fight the creations when they arise; even if they did destroy it, the ocean is vast and

its trenches many. Another would likely pop up within months. In all likelihood, a few secret missions have probably already failed.

The thought makes him reach for the silver flask under his jacket. He thinks of his ouroboros gourd, wrapped in a shirt and buried at the bottom of his bow case. With its golden veins, it's too precious to drink from now -- the last true relic from his old life, save for Storm Bow. Even his old *kyūdō-gi* was too recognizable to take along; its ashes now grace the bottom of an Overwatch trash furnace, probably.

It's too bad. He thought he'd die in those clothes.

The ship drifts so close to the Colossi that Hanzo can make out the erosion in its gears, the space behind its eyes where sea birds have built their nests. He wonders how long it will last before the water reclaims it. Or until some neighboring country decides its best to knock them down like offensive, unwanted monuments.

Then he's seized by a novel impulse. Leaning back from the railing he looks once, twice, four times up and down the deck. Then he takes out his phone, holds it up to the passing giant, and snaps a few pictures. The ship's wake crashes against the omnic's throat, a pacific subject to time and the archer's camera.

He brings up the photos, flips through them. His first thought is to send one to Cassidy, but the gunslinger hasn't texted him back since Manila and there's no way Hanzo is sending another. It's frustrating enough that he never replied (especially with how open and effusive he'd been in Gibraltar, even when angry), but to send those photos with no explanation, no context? Hanzo had shut his phone off just to stop himself from brooding, had taken to the wilderness and climbed the most difficult ridge in the Philippines just to put the man out of his mind. Like the irreverent Lena Oxton's sing-song saying: *tit for tat . If Cassidy doesn't care, then I certainly don't.*

Then he thinks of sending them to Genji, but his little brother also hasn't initiated contact since that first night in Hong Kong. And it doesn't feel like the right time. Not yet.

Then he thinks of sending the photos to Hana, but stills that impulse as well. He wants to believe that *she* wouldn't hold to all that Talon nonsense, but there's no way to be sure with that girl. He remembers how, while they were shopping in Lisbon, she'd just *handed* him all of her packages while she took selfies with half a dozen fans. After about ten seconds, Hanzo dumped her bags on the sidewalk and strode away. Hana nearly screamed at him. She definitely pulled on his sash. They'd argued for a hot minute before separately purchasing tea at the same cafe and nursing their pride in opposite corners.

Hanzo tosses his cigarette over the railing with a fond smirk. Under his breath: *"gaki."*

But the squabble passed. Hana stopped again to take selfies right before they left, invited Hanzo to join, but the archer stayed well out of everyone's lens. He didn't want to end up on some kid's social media feed -- especially an Asian kid. It could've put them in danger. Hanzo's mental motors run themselves dry thinking about all the different ways it could've put them in danger.

But he doesn't have to worry about Hana. He wonders what she's doing right now. He takes another swig from his flask as her tinny laughter pierces the fog: *"Remember, old man -- in Korean, Hana means 'number one.'"* He recalls the advice he gave her: *trust* . Trust that it will all come together. It's okay to take the weight of the world off your shoulders once in awhile.

His expression falls when he remembers how, after he'd given that advice, she'd rolled her eyes and strode off. The message probably fell flat from the mouth of someone like him.

Mumbled to the fog: "should've sent the cowboy."

That night, the rocking ship lures him into a primordial sleep and the stone lanterns visit again. One floating *ishi-dōrō* glows faint and golden through the black, silent and eternal. Hanzo's feet are pulled down as if by cosmic tar, forcing him to keep walking or be absorbed by the void. As he reaches the lantern, he can see dusty moths dancing around the blurred glow. A dull thrumming noise hints at technology swathed beneath the granite skin -- the mechanism that makes the lanterns float above their stone base. His father's idea. A personal preference that Hanzo never shared.

He lifts his head to see another lantern on the horizon. Like the moths, he is compelled towards the light. As he climbs through the shadow, dusty white clouds rise like puffs of smoke. He looks down to see a firm limestone path crunch beneath his dragon-toed feet. One drunken misstep, and he's falling, sinking. Looking up at the lantern until it dwindles to nothing. Shattering like ancient clay into so many jagged shards.

He wakes with a start, disturbing the other passengers in his room: a woman with a sick daughter. She gives him something to help him sleep and he takes it without question. He does not remember the wakeful interval come morning.

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Days later, he's sitting in another chair, with another drink, at a cafe patio in sunny Ho Chi Minh. There are tables set up on the sidewalk and vacationers are using the tropical weather as an excuse to drink in the middle of the day. Winter drives rich men south and Hanzo is

there to scrape the cream off the top. He's pretending to read a newspaper, eavesdropping on a business associate of his Mark, gleaning dates and locations -- using their tipsy recklessness to his own advantage. His thoughts careen forward and back and over again, drawing mental maps, spinning a web of strategy while the city pulses on beside. Pigeons roost on war memorials old and new, mingling dander with the pollution of a city built on two levels: superhighways above, ancient roads below. Motorbikes and hovertaxis flow like dingy *koi* down a muddied river, too close, too loud. A radio booms with ancient American funk from a car stuck in traffic: *ain't I clean, bad machine, super cool, super mean...*

Hanzo removes his glasses to wipe the lenses. They're chiefly for disguise, but he has to admit that his farsightedness has gotten worse over the years -- another sign of his stresses catching up with him, like the gray. His ears, however, are better than ever; he picks up just what he needs from the conversation. He'll have to move on the Mark's villa tonight, during a holiday party. Christmas is coming and soon men of this ilk will be back home with their families. Safe in their real worlds.

As soon as Hanzo replaces the glasses and re-focuses on his newspaper, he sees something that rips his mind from its own real world.

Reports on suspected Overwatch activity. Blurred candids of Lena Oxton grace the entire middle section, alongside reports of an anachronistically-dressed gunslinger thwarting local crime. It's only a single journalist elucidating second-hand information (spontaneous acts of vigilantism captured with shaky cameras and excitable testimonials), but the details are unmistakeable.

Hanzo removes his glasses and watches the letters swim into one unified headline -- *So Much For Overwatch Laying Low: Two Thoughtless Assholes Spotted in London and Roswell, Ruin Everything.*

It's enough to make him re-open the text conversation with Cassidy, where his last message still hangs. Mocking him with whitespace. He can't blame the gunslinger for not responding; if he truly thinks that Hanzo is a spy, it's beyond understandable. But to not even merit a 'fuck off?' What is he playing at? Could it be a ploy to make Hanzo reveal his location so the gunslinger can enact his own brand of Western justice? Was the sender even Cassidy, or just someone with access to his cloud? Should he risk reaching out when their security is already compromised?

Air puffs from his nostrils; there's not enough information to make an informed decision. And (as he constantly reminds himself), it's not his problem to begin with. Whether or not Overwatch is exposed does not impact him in the slightest. If Genji is no longer able to work for a band of reckless, self-proclaimed watchdogs, all the better. Everyone will return to their former lives, no worse for wear. The world will spin on.

But the desire for information, for even a glimpse at the whole picture, keeps Hanzo locked in limbo. Pigeons flutter. Traffic drones. The associates of his Mark depart from their table and he hardly notices.

With another steadying breath, he decides to keep it light, with just enough sly goading to lure the gunslinger out of his reticence but giving an interloper nothing to work with:

Hanzo:

Turning to vigilantism in your ample spare time?

Then he stands, folds his paper on the table and stalks inside the cafe. He has enough information for the job -- now he needs a drink.

The smell of Thai basil and lime accompanies clinking glasses and soft conversation. Hanzo blinks up towards the high ceiling to see more pigeons fluttering through open skylights. A variety of gleaming plants drape across tiered steel beams, drooping like dark green tentacles. It reminds him of ancient drawings: the hanging gardens of Babylon.

The bar is new, but the omnic serving drinks is very old — repaired and remade many times over. Hanzo can see the new joints on his old chassis, the mismatch of his white plating. Garish red wires are tucked under his black apron and broad bow-tie. It's an odd thing, Hanzo muses, when omnics wear clothes. He figures it's usually because someone else wants to make money -- dress up the 'bot, give it a name tag and your customers won't feel so squeamish. Sometimes it's because the omnic itself wants to blend in, feel normal. Both seem like a weak farce.

He keeps his eyes on the counter as he slides into a seat. "Whiskey."

The bartender's eyes are wide slots, his mouth a rounded line with a hint of steel membrane beyond. His face is reminiscent of Zenyatta, but the rounded white covers make his steel skeleton seem less gaunt, less artificial. Another farce.

In a soft, lilting British accent: "I'm sorry, sir, but I've just gone on break."

Hanzo looks up, confused. The omnic waits, and then, with perfect timing: "And now it's over. Had just enough time for a healthy lunch and several seedy romance novels. Whiskey, you said?"

He couldn't have picked a worse audience with which to try out his comedic subroutines. "...Please."

The omnic pours the drink and sets it in front of Hanzo, who thanks him and immediately downs it. Anise sparkles the flavor, gives his tongue something novel to mull over while his thoughts circle back to the article and everything it could mean.

But the omnic is a chatty one: "In town on business, sir?"

Hanzo looks up at him, then nudges his glass forward. "Vacation."

“Ah. Good time for it. Unseasonably warm winter we’re having.” The omnic pours more whiskey, then picks up a wine glass to polish, holding the base in one linen and balling another inside the bowl. “Or so I’ve been told.”

Hanzo sips slowly this time, taking in the dull scrapes on the omnic’s hands, the slight outline of nails on his plastic fingers. Normally he’d ignore him, enjoy his drink in silence or take it elsewhere. Now he’s itchy for distraction.

“Must be odd,” he grunts.

The omnic doesn’t look up from his polishing. “What’s odd?”

“Commenting about the weather when it does not affect you.”

“Well,” he lifts the glass to the light to ensure he’s cleaned all the streaks, his tone just as sparkling, “I don’t like the rain.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes. It’s always slightly stilted, talking to an omnic. He can too potently sense their inhumanity, their lack of inner discourse. Sometimes it feels like he’s talking to a sociopath, or someone who grew up in an alien society too bizarre for him to imagine.

The archer taps the counter. “Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?”

“I have no secrets.”

“What is it like, having to relate to humans every day, when you cannot experience life as they do?”

The bartender's head goes still along with his linens. Watching an omnic process an unfamiliar question is another odd thing to experience; even with perpetual-learning programs, true novelty is difficult to compute. The older models have to configure the new information against pre-existing data and the results are always a little skewed; more a portrait of the processes than of the machine itself. Like human consciousness, there are endless shades of AI.

But then the omnic tilts his head, bows his chin, and shrugs in a way that almost reads as self-conscious. “A few things *are* difficult. For example, it is difficult to relate to people when I can remember everything they’ve ever said. Most people don’t seem to *mean* everything they say, or they change their minds all the time. Inconsistency is troublesome -- for me. And *projection* ,” the omnic starts polishing again, faster this time, tone still light, “My therapist taught me that word. She says it happens a lot to omnics. Humans projecting onto them. But,” he looks up and Hanzo thinks he can see re-focusing lenses through the hollow slots, “Though we are different, it doesn’t mean we’re not the same.” He turns back to his polishing. “In many ways, we are the same."

Hanzo stares, bewildered. He’d never considered there could be therapists for omnics. He drops his gaze, feeling oddly chastised.

“Beer, please.”

“That is to say,” the omnic shrugs one joint as he fetches a beer glass, “Even the ‘enlightened’ ones have to make an effort to relate somehow. Mondatta wore modified Buddhist robes.”

Hanzo thinks of the suit he ruined on that rooftop in Hong Kong and instinctively adjusts a cufflink that isn’t there. He stares at the perfect head of foam on his beer as the omnic sets it in front of him: almost too pretty to drink. “I remember seeing him for the first time. Giving a speech on the evening news.” He lifts the beer to his lips. “I did not understand the robes. It seemed like an act.”

The omnic bows forward and shakes his chest in a laugh, yet no sound emerges. He takes no breath, but displays the convulsions. Hanzo stares, wondering just how old and re-repaired this model is, how many times he’s gone under the knife and emerged anew. Barely enough memory to write his own story, understand his own body. Trauma as visible as any tattoo.

Eerily redolent of Lena Oxton: “All of it’s an act, sir.”

Four hours later, Hanzo is coasting up a new road on an old motorbike. Wind cools the skin left exposed by his black sleeveless shirt. The smell of burnt gasoline mingles strangely with the fecund odor of tended plants. His gloves feel good against his palms, Storm Bow’s case solid and reassuring on his back. Even through his aviators, every color is bright and deeply saturated, from the azure sky to the emerald rice fields.

Men and women in sunproof gear tend crops beside agricultural omnics, spindly and faceless, legs like stretched-out giraffes and twice as tall. All have survived a barrage of typhoons, year after year, always by each other’s side. Hanzo recalls reading about a record-breaking storm that ravished the north half of the country last season, yet here are the fields, as lush and verdant as if the plants had merely gone dormant after a long winter. He thinks of Mei, the red tide, and the wind-whipped yellow flowers on Gibraltar’s cliffs. He never got to ask her what kind they were. Hardy little things.

He keeps his eyes on the road, the reassuring horizon, but his mind is elsewhere. It’s the transience of it that gets him. All of this could be underwater in a few months -- so could Gibraltar. The world is wracked with devastation left and right, repaired and re-repaired, always coming out of it a little more tired, a little less willing to go on. Slowed under the weight of scars. *Not everything can be repaired with gold.*

The bike shudders to a halt at the top of the hill. Hanzo’s boot stations on the pavement and his eyelids grow heavy on the dwindling sun. He thinks of how he’s always looked down from high places, how that shifted from the lofty disdain of his youth to the black despondency of middle-age. Despite his recent troubles, he no longer tries to judge the distance, no longer thinks about the impact or how Genji will find out. He isn’t sure when that happened. He isn’t sure if it will last.

Then he thinks of how Cassidy called him out, how he tried to be kind while exposing him utterly. Honesty like a knife and a salve all at once. Hanzo remembers the genuine fear in his voice, something that turned his stomach in ways he still can't label. The gunslinger shouldn't have wanted to talk about something so difficult and combustible with someone he was trying to lay. Bringing it up went against every character trait Hanzo assigned him. He could've kept his mouth shut, smiled that big smile and the archer still probably would've made a move.

Then he considers that perhaps Cassidy was able to read his thoughts because he'd once experienced them himself. That old-record refrain warbles through his mind: *we're not that different.* Scars never seemed to slow the cowboy down.

Maybe it's because the sky is mimicking the same tangerine hue as Gibraltar's best sunsets. Maybe it's because Hanzo is traveling alone to kill someone that he does not know. Maybe it's because he's thought of Cassidy at least a hundred times since receiving those photos and he's just tired of fighting it. Whatever the cause, he gives in with a sigh. Lets the memories flow. If the man is going to occupy space in his head, he might as well set up a room. He uses that sense of transience to reassure himself: *these memories, too, will pass.*

Then he holds up the camera to take another photo. This time he frames his own mixed expression along with part of the bike, the rice fields and the falling sun. If this Mark ends up killing him, at least he'll have interesting photos to flick through afterwards.

But someone else got there first.

By the time the archer reaches the beachside villa, those not dead have long-since vanished. The violet horizon backlights the jungle's jagged silhouette as Hanzo makes his way over limp bodies with clean headshots.

Like a ghost among ghosts, he slips past well-kept palmettos and stone fountains. He makes sure he is alone before emerging from the shadow and entering the villa. His dragon-toed feet echo on the marble floor as he passes through a massive foyer, littered with the glass from a half-shattered chandelier and discarded cocktails. Smoke from the kitchen lures him inside; someone left so quickly they forgot to turn the oven off.

He powers down the appliance with a grim frown. Assassins don't cause this kind of terror -- there's no point to it.

As he makes his way through the house, a tangerine glow catches his eye through the patio doors. A massive portal of beveled glass opens for him in concentric spirals, spreads to reveal a palm-lined pool speckled with fire. Spots of oil slick the surface and burn freely, casting flickering shadows across the villa's exterior. Hanzo steps closer, finds the source of the spill: upended tiki torches, a couple of which still float in the pool.

Then he notices a flashing glow -- something is attached to a floating lounger. He approaches slowly, checking roofs and corners. He keeps beneath the shadow of the villa. The jungle falls silent under the rush of blood in his ears.

As the lounger spins, Hanzo sees it: a proximity mine. Its six-legged cylinder glows with a sickly purplish hue -- undoubtedly some kind of chemical agent.

Attached is a fluttering piece of paper with lavish cursive, large enough to read from a distance: *C'est dommage* , *Shimada* .

Hanzo immediately backs away, looks up and over his shoulder. The moon emerges from behind fast-moving clouds, just skimming the black canopy. All is chirping nightlife and rustling palms. No telling where the assassin is now.

When Hanzo is far from the villa and finally asleep, he dreams a memory. Sharpened flecks of metal pierce his skin over and over, hours upon hours, every day for several days. Sweat runs down his throat and blood beads alongside the ink, but his expression shows no pain. He chases it with strong saké and a fountain of pride. He lay on a bamboo mat with his jacket folded under his head, staring out through the slightly open *shōji.* His weak lids flutter on specks of pollen and spores, glimmering essence floating without purpose, riding the sweet spring breeze. The special gold paint makes him feverish and weak; he can only sit for the tattoo for so long at a time, but is pressured to sit for longer, especially since his elders keep popping in unexpectedly to see how the young heir is doing.

Genji visits him once, but Hanzo hates his company, dismisses him after just a few minutes. His hair is as soft and green as the outer world he cannot join, the unfolding spring he cannot witness. His brother's face is shifting before him, turning from a childhood companion into another wooden piece he will soon have to manipulate, falling in line with countless others. Another factor in an equation he alone must solve.

Then his sweat starts to overflow, runs with the pigment, covers his body like embryonic fluid. It turns his long hair into a twisting inky slash on the bamboo mat. Color stains his flesh and brittle scales harden and crack on his arm; the reptile growing and shedding its skin all at once.

Then the beast turns from his wrist and swallows itself, devouring Hanzo along with the rest of the floating world.

The hover-transport out of Bangkok is as large as six elephants and twice as cumbersome, but at least the man in the bunk below Hanzo is burning something that dulls his senses. All except his mind, which spins uncontrollably on the compartment ceiling. Rune has found another mark in Kolkata, but can give no information regarding the mysterious French assassin. Tone is impossible to discern over text, but given her scant replies, he has more than enough room to suspect that she is withholding information. With her increasing duplicitousness, the continued reports on suspected Overwatch activity, and a skilled assassin somewhere out there who knows him by name, Hanzo has more than enough to keep him awake.

And if his obsessive pondering wasn't enough, there's also a freak hailstorm moving in; fat ice chunks pelt the thick steel above his head like heaven's punishment. Too metallic, too close by. *Spurs on concrete.*

His sleeplessness kicked into full-blown insomnia a week ago, in Cambodia. He'd spent those days doing nothing but smoking on the roof of his motel, sparring with young locals in a nearby alley, and waiting for a sign: a text, an article, some clue on the evening news. Time that should've been used for rest and training was squandered with distraction after distraction. He'd wandered the temples at Angkor Wat (splendid), meditated under the statue of a many-armed god (invigorating), took a boat down the brown waters of the Siem Reap River (serene), but still his worries followed. If he doesn't shut down his thoughts and get some sleep soon, he thinks, it'll be another in a long line of wasted opportunities for rest.

He reaches for the lukewarm chai on a rack by his head. The restlessness is severe, but the trip hasn't been all bad. His bed is small, yet sturdy and comfortable. The accommodations are humble, yet full of colorful murals (his compartment showcases orange tigers and cobalt skies). Everything smells of sweet spice and jungle foliage. The hover-transport, though well-past capacity, is full of friendly families that keep to themselves but insist that you accept another piece of *naan* back to your bunk for later. It's been a long time since Hanzo was in a place that looked kindly on beggars and, given his state, he's sure that's exactly what he looks like.

He leans over the edge of his bunk to check on the old man below, who has fallen asleep with his still-burning hookah forgotten on the floor. A large copy of *Hindi for Beginners* sits splayed over his beer belly. Hanzo had noticed the book right away.

After affirming that the hookah isn't about to catch fire and kill them all, the archer falls back into his bunk. He wonders how Nesrin is doing. Past the dark mosquito netting, he can picture her at the convention in Shanghai, chatting the ears off stern old lecturers. He thinks of Mei, imagines them getting along; Nesrin searching in the digital, Mei searching in the earth.

Then he turns under his blanket and thinks: *how would you know?* Did he really know Mei any better than he knew Nesrin? Did he really know *anyone* at Gibraltar, or did they just pass through his life like any other stranger in a crowd, now nothing but photos for him to wear out with time and distance? They certainly didn't know him -- he never allowed for it. He can't blame them for assuming he's a spy. If anything, he's surprised they let him stick around for as long as he did.

With a sudden tightness in his chest, Hanzo realizes: Genji probably had to do a lot of convincing.

This time, when the impulse seizes him, he doesn't think about it. He just reaches in the dark, grabs his phone and calls his brother.

Genji answers quicker than expected. "Hanzo. Are you alright?"

"Fine." He assumes a stiff politeness like old armor, shaken by his own spontaneity. "How are you?"

But Genji ignores the veil of cordiality and dives right in: "Well, we left Nepal. I've never been good at keeping still, as you know. Zenyatta is the same way. Two weeks at the temple told us that it wasn't where we belonged. We've been traveling ever since. Other temples, mostly -- that's pretty much all that will receive us -- but some villages, too. Small places. He wants to reach out to people and I was getting tired of being so… I dunno. The piety of it is what gets me, I think. They were kind in Nepal, but… Sometimes the way those omnics talk about the Iris reminds me of the family. Dogmatic, you know?"

The younger brother's open chattiness relaxes Hanzo. "I didn't know Zenyatta wanted to evangelize."

"Yeah. I mean, he wants to build better relationships between humans and omnics. That takes some conversations."

"If he wants to reach a larger crowd, there are better ways of doing it."

"Like Mondatta did?"

"Hn." Hanzo re-chews his thoughts. "He could still send a message that they are not afraid with a more publicized --"

"This isn't a clan war, Hanzo. Zen knows what he's doing."

It's one thing to face his brother's obvious reverence for an omnic, an outsider; it's another to have his own authority so blatantly dismissed. At least, over the phone, Genji can't see his grinding jaw.

The youngest breaks the silence before it can grow any thicker: "Is the ramen in Hong Kong still good?"

"Not better than Hanamura." Hanzo shifts on his back, his thumb tapping against his sternum. "Do you remember that night when Yuudai got drunk and fell asleep on the bar?"

“How could I forget? You poured cold *soba* down his pants.”

“That was you, Genji.”

“...No, it wasn’t, it was you.”

“You. I told Daichi to help him to the bathroom but he just wandered outside, trailing noodles. He spilled it all over Daichi’s shoes and they got into a fight. Started trashing the place.”

“Oh yeah! Shit, you broke Daichi’s arm, right?”

“Yes. And his father was furious. So was our father.”

“Well… it was a fun night.”

Hanzo snorts, but can't disagree; picturing Yuudai’s dopey face still makes him grin.

Then he remembers: “are communications still on lockdown with Overwatch?"

“Yes. Winston hasn't contacted me yet.”

“I saw Cassidy and Lena in the paper.”

“Haha, oh yeah. I did see that.”

“Not very low-profile. What are they thinking?”

“How should I know? They were both bound to get into trouble sooner or later -- Cassidy most of all. He couldn’t keep in line if he tried. You should’ve seen him in Blackwatch! Almost as bad as me.”

Hanzo grinds his jaw again. “He sent me photos. Photos from Gibraltar.”

“Oh yeah? That was nice of him.”

More grinding. “But he hasn’t responded to my messages. What’s his game? Why would he do that?”

“Man, you two really gotta stop treating me like your messenger. I haven’t talked to Cassidy since we both left the rock, Hanzo, and even if I did -- you are both tight-lipped mother fuckers. Maybe tell him you’re sorry? That could start things off.”

“Apologize? For *what?”*

“I don’t know, Hanzo -- for getting along so well for weeks and then ditching without a word? For freaking out about his cybernetics and leaving him high and dry? For being a general asshole? I mean, fuck -- he was the friendliest person to you on that base, crush or no crush. Did you ever even thank him?”

A pause. “You’re one to talk about gratitude.”

“Oh, no. Don’t even *try* to turn this around on me. I’ll hang up right now.”

Another, longer pause. “I’m sorry.”

“Tell *him* that. Then maybe he’ll talk to you.”

Hanzo flashes back to the Russian mission: trying to clean the scorch marks from Genji’s armor. Arguing over heroics. Frustrated with his inability to undo mistakes old and new. Finding the right words was never his strong suit. Old complaints from his little brother come back crystalline clear, though years have passed in-between: *you don’t know how to have a conversation, Hanzo -- you only know how to give commands.*

That doesn't make it any easier to take advice from his little brother. A hard breath falls from his lungs and he mutters: “perhaps.”

He can hear the cheer in Genji's voice, but remarkably, he doesn't boast. “It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

They hang up with an agreement to talk again soon. The hailstorm softens just as the hookah smoke reaches its apex, creating conditions gentle enough for Hanzo to close his eyes. Humility tastes like something too foreign to name, but at least he can recognize it in others.

“Genji, Izo was a snitch.”

Days have passed in the blur of near-constant travel. Hanzo strides off a small bus and into a village with his phone pressed to his ear. His eyes scan for a convenience store, somewhere he can restock for the rest of his trip.

This time, Genji called him. “What? No, he wasn’t.”

“He was. The Otomo family. Apparently he’d been with them for years."

“WHAT?”

“You never guessed? Come on, he couldn’t have told you a very convincing cover story before he left for France.” Hanzo switches his bow case to his opposite shoulder and he walks into a small market. “He wasn’t that smart.”

“You should’ve told me!”

“So you could learn that your friend was a traitor and that father forced him out of the country?” He lifts up a bottle of insect repellent, squinting at the foreign label. “Absolutely not.”

“That’s so fucking… I *loved* Izo.”

“That’s why father extradited him rather than having him killed.”

“Shit… I hope he’s doing okay. He was such a funny guy.”

“Funny? He almost set fire to my Maybach.”

“Like I said.”

"I still have your old *kyūdō-gi,* by the way."

Hanzo sits in a corner cafe, slurping down noodles. "You kept it?"

"I left all your old stuff at Gibraltar. Probably still sitting in your dorm. Thought you might come ho-- come back. Eventually. Wishful thinking, I guess."

Hanzo walks right over that one. "I thought you might have tossed it in one of the furnaces."

"Ha! I'm not that dramatic."

"Genji, you once sat in a hotel pool in Bali for four hours because you didn't win that Muay Thai tournament."

"That was *you* , Hanzo. I was only in the pool out of solidarity."

"..."

"You don't remember because you were drunk."

"Oh. Yes."

“There is something that I wanted to ask you.”

More nights, more trains. The sun has set by the time Hanzo is on another. He figures that, if he doesn’t sleep, he can make it through Myanmar by tonight. Or is it tomorrow? Time is running together and coffee is no longer working. There’s an ache in his stomach that’s been there for days; he doesn’t even look at the young farmer walking down the aisle, her tray full of dripping watermelon.

Genji sounds like he’s on a beach, for all his ease. “Oh yeah? 'Bend my ear.'”

“When did you... learn to accept your new self? Your new life.”

Silence; the insects take over. Hanzo chews his cheek, purses his lips. With no sense of his brother's new boundaries and a few decade's worth of interpersonal landmines, he can never be sure if he's overstepping. This way of talking, without hierarchy or goal, is entirely new. Maybe it'll never feel normal.

But Genji hardly alters his tone. "To be honest, I don't know. It still feels like it's happening. I guess it was around the time that I realized that I still love you, that I wanted to forgive you. I couldn't hold on to my rage anymore. I didn't want it." Then a very human breath, and some of Genji's lightness returned, "But it had been such a huge part of me for so long, I had to start from square one. I had to realize I was whole without it. Accepting my body was a part of that. Does that make sense?"

Hanzo balks. He hasn't heard Genji tell him that he loved him since they were very small. He knew he did, at least before -- they'd shown their affection through deeds and honors and mutual (if complicated) respect, but never with words. To hear it now, after everything that's happened, renders him speechless. And deeply uncomfortable.

Nonplussed, Genji continues: "I still have bad days, but not nearly as many. Zenyatta just --" Now his voice cuts out. When he resumes, he has that affected, almost dreamy quality he adopts whenever he talks about the omnic and his influence, a tone that conjures mixed emotions in the elder brother. "I'll never be able to explain the effect he had on me. He took away more than my anger. He *changed* me. I *am* myself, but also beyond myself?" A stricken sigh. "I can't describe it."

"That's… good."

"Plus, I have *shuriken* that come out of my knuckles. That's pretty badass no matter how you look at it."

Hanzo chuckles, breaking his own tension. "I am surprised that you… took so long to accept it. I mean," he clears his throat, assembles his thoughts. "You spent so much time in that arcade, you loved those *sentai* shows. You would've pierced half your body if I hadn't stopped you. I know it is… I know you were no longer yourself, but… It does seem like something you'd think was cool."

"Well, it wasn't so cool at first, Hanzo."

"No, I -- forgive me, that is not what I --"

"It's okay. I *do* think it's cool, now. Or, at least... I don't know. I'm at peace with it. Actually -- I think I was partially upset because I knew what *your* reaction would've been. And our parents'. The whole family, really."

"You worried what I -- what they would think? Even after--?"

"Yeah. But, I mean… they were my parents, too. I wanted their approval on *some* level. But I never realized that before. I just did whatever I wanted. I thought I didn't matter. Only *you* mattered." Genji lets out a weak snicker, his voice lowering. "I envied that."

Hanzo thinks of the green hair, his father's laughter wrapped around that diminutive nickname: *sparrow* . "I always thought you mattered more."

"Well, now we *both* don't matter, so I guess we're even."

Hanzo lets out a dry cackle. Genji snickers.

Then Genji lifts his tone. "Where are you now?"

"Somewhere in Myanmar. Headed to India."

He grows quieter. "For a job?"

"Yes."

Quieter still. "You know you don't have to do this, right?"

Hanzo leans back in his chair and sighs through his nostrils. He glances across the aisle, where two old women in saris are playing poker. One of them keeps getting agitated and teasing the other; both can't stop smiling. "Can you imagine me doing anything else?"

"Hmm… Sushi chef?"

"Ha!"

"Brain surgeon?"

"Stop."

"Hair stylist?"

"Genji."

"Archery is less marketable, Hanzo. Unless you give street performances! Remember when I let you shoot oranges off my head? In the conference room? I bet they framed the wall you broke."

Hanzo stifles a chuckle. Genji's voice glides from the irreverent to the sincere: "I mean… there actually *are* a lot of things you are good at, brother."

Silence.

"Zenyatta and I are headed to Indonesia. Are you sure you won't join us? You would like it. You wouldn't have to go with us when we talk to people. We could find something fun to do. Sight-seeing. Surfing."

The proposed image strikes Hanzo with startling clarity and, to his own surprise, he chokes back his strongest laugh yet. Incredulous: *"surfing?* "

"Well," now Genji laughs, cracked in many places, "I need something else to do other than worry about the state of your soul, Hanzo!"

Hanzo slouches in his seat. “Genji.” Then, lowering his voice: “you know that I don’t kill anyone who doesn’t --”

Genji snaps, “Don’t tell me some shit like ‘they deserve it.’” He cuts himself off like he used to whenever he was holding back deep emotion, which he was never good at. With his robotic voice, it sounds like the sudden switching off of a microphone. But Hanzo still recognizes it.

He opens his mouth to speak, but stops when he hears another voice in the background: Zenyatta. The two fall into a muted discussion and Hanzo frowns at the seat-back in front of him.

One of the women playing cards shouts something in Hindi, drawing his attention. She scoops up her winnings while the other groans in defeat. Hanzo thinks about all the card games he’s ever played, hands he’s won and lost. By far the best and the worst was being born a Shimada. It’s a life no one deserves to lead, but still one he wouldn’t trade. Most days, he can hold these conflicting ideas at once, one in each hand. Today it throws his headache from a dull throb into searing pain. He'll have to find some medicine at the next stop to alleviate these persistant travel-bugs.

His rasp is almost lost under the rattle of the train: “Genji. There’s something else. There's... another assassin. They took out a Mark before I could. They seemed to know who I --”

But the youngest sweeps back in with his own urgency: “Hanzo, I have to go. Think about what I said. We’ll talk again soon.”

Genji hangs up. Hanzo lowers his phone and watches the old women laugh, shuffle the deck, and start a new game.

Halfway through Myanmar, when all the other passengers are asleep, Rune calls. Hanzo hardly believes what he’s seeing. Not because of the pills he took so that he’d be able to make the next train, but because he hasn’t heard Rune’s voice in nearly ten years. She never calls him. And he knows far better than to call her.

He hunches over his phone and keeps his voice to a whisper: “Rune?”

Her voice is still the same crisp, thoroughly American symphony: “I heard you turned down the Moscow job and had to call so I could personally find out if you’d gone fucking insane.”

Hanzo glowers. “I do not recall any clause in our contract that stipulated I had to explain myself to you.”

“It’s my money, too, Hanzo. I’m trying to make my money *and* your money. Why don’t you want your money, Hanzo?”

With a series of short glances, he assures himself that no one is eavesdropping. “Moscow is too cold right now. Find something below the tropical line and I will consider it.”

“Hanzo, it’s *two hundred million dollars* . That’s a payday that would set you up for *life* . What are you --”

“I am *not* ,” Hanzo curves over his phone, hunched like a vulture, “Killing *Katya Volskaya.”*

Rune hisses in his ear, *“Shut the fuck up!* Are you crazy?”

“This line is secure, or you would not have called me at all.”

“That doesn’t mean --” Rune snarls under her breath, but composes herself in an instant. Switches channels like a holovid. “What’s your reasoning here? Too risky? Too prolific? Walk me through your concerns.”

“First,” Hanzo continuously scans the other passengers, “You do not know who sent you that contract. I do not operate for shadows.”

“When it’s this much money, Hanzo, it doesn’t matter if the deal comes from Satan himself -- you *take that deal.”*

“Second, killing her would throw an already unstable world into even greater chaos. Chaos is bad for business.”

“Uhhh, it’s *great* for our business, what are you even --?”

“Lastly, I simply do not want to. For personal reasons.”

“Are these the same ‘personal reasons’ that took you out of the game last summer?”

Silence.

“Listen, *oyabun* . You’re not the most enthusiastic I’ve ever dealt with, but you are the best. If you really don’t want to do this anymore, this is your ticket out. Take this contract and you’ll be *free* . Who are you --”

Hanzo ends the call, turns off his phone and rests his head against the shaking window. He sees that they are passing the ancient city of Bagan. His moistureless eyes blink slowly, soften on the lavender mist, notice the bright horizon peeking over the massive valley. Then he realizes, with a twinge of dis-ease, that he isn’t sure if it’s a sunrise or a sunset.

He finds the briefcase in the appointed spot near an abandoned dock on the Hooghly River. He opens it with Rune's combination and finds the agreed-upon payment in American dollars. He could have asked for more, but the mark wasn't too notorious, and by no means time-consuming. By far one of the easiest targets Hanzo ever put an arrow through. There wasn't even security -- just a weak entourage that now attends the bottom of the river. His chances at an honorable death, struck down in battle by a worthy foe, are starting to look as fantastical as one of his father's stories.

The briefcase slips beneath the passenger seat of a rented hovercar. Every step of the fight flashes through Hanzo's mind as he searches for areas of improvement: approach, speed, reaction. The mark had tried to face him down and the archer hadn't expected it -- with a disapproving grunt, he pulls out the rearview mirror to inspect a gash across his cheekbone. These *nouveau riche* CIO's were something else; brash and overconfident, even to the end. Even without training. They reminded Hanzo of that celebrity kid back in Manila who'd thrown him eyes -- too much power and not enough years to know how to handle it. But not too young to die.

He'll have to work on his adaptability. As he coasts back into the city, the performance review gives way to a barrage of facts about the Mark's life. The research process is so intensive that the details can't help but swarm him like persistent flies, each file and photograph obliterating any chance at clear thought. Now he has to go through the equally stringent process of forgetting. He has to push the man from the top of his mind to the very bottom, alongside all the others.

Hanzo returns to his hotel room through the window, hides the briefcase and then slips into the cyan-tinted bathroom for a shower. Embedded Vishkar hard-lights cast hard shadows and Hanzo stops when he notices his own stark reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. He's gotten leaner; a product of his Spartan lifestyle. His hair, though neatly tied, is getting too long; still uneven and choppy where he'd trimmed it with his knife. Adding to the new cut on his cheekbone is a yellowing bruise on his shoulder from where he'd been struck by an ornery drunk. There's an old scab across his arm where he'd gotten nicked by a would-be assassin's blade in Mawlamyine. There's a subtle rash on his thigh from who-knows-what. There are dark circles under his eyes where his insomnia and alcoholism make themselves known more every day, and just now he's noticing a mysterious shadow by his temple. He brushes it off, smearing blood down his cheekbone -- not his own.

And that's all the attention his reflection receives before he steps into the shower and starts scrubbing away. Genji might wonder about the state of his soul, but he doesn't; he'd stopped thinking about the men he killed long ago. It got easier over time. He finds reasons for his

actions as easily as he multiplies large numbers in his head: techniques he learned from a young age. Child's play. Besides -- most of his marks are players in a game they understood going in. All of them signed up for the possibility of encountering someone like Hanzo a very long time ago. Most had multiple chances to turn back. He spares no sympathy for their loss, but in moments he doesn't think too hard about, lights incense before allowing his eyes to close for the night.

But this job feels different from the others. He was young -- the file didn't prepare Hanzo for how young he would look in person. The last time he'd taken a life in exchange for a locked briefcase was a couple of days before Genji found him in Hanamura, about a month before he arrived at Gibraltar. Maybe it's because he knows Genji is out there now, lamenting his choices, that this doubt nags him so incessantly. Maybe the boy even looked too much like Genji. Maybe it's because he can all-too easily see the cowboy's reflection in the space behind his own, peering over his shoulder with those whiskey-brown eyes. Not judgmental -- just waiting. Irritatingly constant, yet with impending abandonment. He knows how Cassidy likes to run.

The gunslinger is not the only one who waits. The dragons writhe up and down Hanzo's spine in a swirling double helix, bristling with divine energy. It's getting hard to ignore their growls. They weren't meant to sleep for so long. Water soothes the electric burn, makes them feel at home, but it's only a matter of time before they will want to come out.

As Hanzo strokes his chest with creamy, delicious-smelling soap, he can't help but think: *at least you are finally enjoying some luxury.*

Kolkata experienced a boom after the Omnic Crisis and Hanzo's hotel is just one of many high-tech comforts the city has come to expect. The entire rooftop bar is covered in glass, giving a panoramic view of the sprawling metropolis and the light-polluted sky above. A turquoise infinity pool lines the balcony perimeter and even extends over the edge in petal-shaped appendages, water flowing over into another floor's receiving pool; viewed from above, it looks like a lotus flower.

Inside, Hanzo's eyes widen on brilliant holograms that dance across black mirror walls, occasionally emerging in seamless three-dimension. Right now it's tropical birds -- they flit past guests in flashes of vermillion or ultramarine, often 'landing' on seat backs or unsuspecting shoulders. A blue bird of paradise floats past Hanzo's nose and he follows its path to a young woman's hand, where another bird already chirps. Their melodious calls mix oddly well with the rhythmic hip-hop pumping from unseen corners, kept at a low volume so as not to distract from the holovids; a big football game has a large bar crowd ordering drink after drink, and the two bartenders aren't stupid enough to break their reverie. Big games mean big sales.

It's all so reassuringly typical, such a neat snapshot of the kind of blithe luxury that Hanzo used to take as normal. Suited in all-black with a white bandage over his cheek, he takes a seat at the far end of the bar and gets the tender's attention with a pointed stare. The four

holoscreens are loud and the crowd rowdy, but he doesn't mind so much; the more bodies and noise around him, the less momentum for his spiraling thoughts.

But he doesn't blend in, can never truly blend in -- he cuts a striking figure even in a lounge full of young, up-and-coming people dressed for a Saturday night. Even his drink, bourbon neat, contrasts heavily with the trippy cocktails and glowing martinis. Already he is meeting a few roving eyes. Already he is making excuses to ignore them.

With his own drifting stare, Hanzo notices that some of the servers' trays are blue hard-light: another Vishkar product slipped into the city's economy. The archer finishes his first drink, then orders another, contemplating the company's huge reach. Soft supposing: *when you can bend reality, there's not much that can stop you.*

Hanzo drowns himself in whiskey that he should be sipping. Cassidy gave him a taste for good bourbon, showed him what was best and what to leave alone. The man would imbibe potato alcohol from a child's sip-cup if he had no other option, but he did know his top-shelf liquors. After drinking little but saké and beer for years, Hanzo likes the way the Kentucky reserve bites, enjoys the malty caramel on the back of his tongue. But it makes him think of Cassidy, and that bites in a way he does not enjoy.

This will pass , he tells himself for what feels like the hundredth time. *Watch the thought. Let the wave rise and then recede. It will pass.*

He's already tried to hurry along the process with two glasses when a strong presence crowds his shoulder. "Can I buy you another?"

Hanzo turns. The voice belongs to an attractive person close to his own age, a rich professional with intricately-woven braids, neon-blue lips and a toothy grin. He can't really tell if it's a man or a woman, but he does notice a strange line of tiny round lights running up the center of their throat. The beads jump from a deep purple at the base to a hot red at the top as they speak: audio-reactive color. He's never seen anything like it.

The liquor helps him produce a smile. "If you like."

"You got it." They gesture to the bartender. A seven-foot tall, six-armed omnic waves back and starts mixing Hanzo's bourbon neat alongside four other concoctions.

The wealthy stranger looks Hanzo up and down with obvious interest. "You come here alone?"

"For now."

Their grin widens, showcasing large front teeth and a few gold molars. "First time in Kolkata?"

"Yes. Seventh time in India."

“Guess you like us, then.”

“You could say that.”

“Any particular factor that keeps you coming back? The food, the women?”

Hanzo accepts his drink from the omnic bartender and lifts it to his lips, eyeing the stranger over the beveled rim. “The heat.”

They chuckle and the lights do a positively flirtatious jump up and down their throat. Then a chime sounds and they mouth *‘sorry’* as they tap a receiver on their earpiece. Given the habitual smoothness of the action and their moneyed appearance, Hanzo guesses that they’re another workaholic. Someone who probably wants something very simple and specific from Hanzo.

He uses the interval to scan them thoroughly from the ground up: tall, curvy. Effusive and freckled and glowing from frequent sunbaths: just his type. He still can’t risk anything intimate, but there’s no harm in some casual banter. He admires the way their braids catch the light -- a bold, glossy black, bunched in the back to form a neat hoop. There are worse distractions.

Without warning, Hanzo flashes back to the prostitute in Hong Kong and her rough tugs on his topknot, and then, like solving a simple logical series, he re-lives the sensation of Cassidy pulling his hair in the cave. Those heaving breaths, that strong grip -- partly to steady himself, partly to remind Hanzo that he was no easy prey. He only needs to think of that moment for a second to smell those ferns, feel that breeze, to hear the gunslinger's rough and ready breaths. To feel his moans vibrate against Hanzo's gripping palm. The feather-light touches Hanzo had grazed over the hardness behind his jeans.

A tooth worries the inside of his lip. The gunslinger has become the biggest distraction of all, despite Hanzo's years' worth of training in self-control. Even thinking about sex with other people has him recalling that heated moment, and imagining countless others. What prevented Hanzo from openly appreciating Cassidy at the time seems paltry, even comical now; like a lost teenage summer enshrined in a much older, regretful mind. Had the cowboy's demeanor *really* been that off-putting, or had Hanzo just been too steeped in bitter distrust to tell? What was he missing out on right now, because of yet more mistakes from his own hand?

No. It was not a mistake. You did what was necessary.

Memories burn worse than the liquor, but Hanzo doesn’t get a chance to truly brood; the sharp-dressed person taps his shoulder, back with that grin.

“So you like to just slide up to bars, look handsome, and wait for someone to pick you up?”

Hanzo smirks at his drink, though there's no mirth in it. "Usually I am given a wide berth.”

“I doubt that. You got this whole magnet thing going on. What’s your name?”

He pretends not to have heard them, but leans closer a moment later, pointing, “What are those lights on your neck, if you do not mind my asking?”

“Oh, shit!” They lean even closer, tilt their head back to show off, “Isn’t it dope? Got it last spring. Pricey, but totally worth it.” They run their fingers up and down the dots. “They react to my vocal frequency. And they change color based on neural signals -- kinda like a mood ring! You ever heard of mood rings?”

Hanzo raises a brow. “And you… this was elective? Cosmetic?”

“Yep! I saw the procedure in a magazine and it just looked so *cool*... I couldn’t resist.”

Hanzo thinks of the prostitute in Hong Kong and her red freckles. The omnic in Ho Chi Minh and his bowtie. Genji’s green hair. Cassidy’s ridiculous belt buckle.

He shakes his head at his drink. “I… that seems…”

“Extreme?” They grin knowingly. “It’s a really simple process, actually. They do a hundred a day.”

He clears his throat. “I see.”

They avert their eyes, shrugging -- suddenly self-conscious under Hanzo’s gaze, as if sensing judgment. “You’re kind of old-fashioned, huh?”

Hanzo straightens his already-straight back. “I am.”

They meet his eyes. “Do you hate cybernetics or something?”

“Not at all,” he scoffs. He meets their bold stare with a look that doesn’t mesh well with his regal features: uncertainty. “If you must know, I believe it is... simply a difference in upbringing. Artificiality of all manner is… I grew up in a family with traditions dating back a thousand years. Adhering to tradition was often all that kept us alive." He looks across the bar, as if staring down an endless timeline. "I spent most of my life venerating the very old and authentic. I worked within and for a group that did not trust outsiders of any sort, let alone the non-human. Cybernetic enhancements were practically un-heard of.” He scratches his beard, shrugs with his brows. “It is not easy for old men to change.”

“Uh-huh," says the stranger, still wary but seemingly ambused. For some reason. "I mean, you don't look that old, but, yeah. It’s whatever, I guess.” Then they pick up their former ease with a hint of levity. “Also, like, I don’t know anyone who’s traveled to India *that* often that wasn’t secretly looking for some kind of pseudo-spiritual ‘enlightenment’ to relieve them of their all-too-serious life. No offense.”

Hanzo raises a brow again -- more severely this time. “I get a lot of work here. It is a large country with massive growth. Many men competing for power.”

“Men, huh?” That toothy grin. “And what do you compete for?”

Hanzo lifts the bourbon to hide his coy grin. “None of your business. *No offense* .”

“Ha! I'll get it out of you, eventually.”

“And what do you--?”

But then Hanzo is cut off by a loud, disappointed cry from the crowd. He looks up and around, annoyed -- until his eyes catch the holovid.

They’ve interrupted the football game with a national alert. The image of a news anchor cuts to a field correspondent in a full-body raincoat. The space behind her is nothing but a gray downpour. Lightning breaks up the camera's light on her haggard expression.

“-- a breaking news alert: South Korea is under attack.”

The camera cuts to the South Korean MEKA unit flying over the stormy Yellow Sea. Among the dozen or so mechs coasting over the choppy surf, a pale pink unit leads the pack.

Hanzo sucks in a breath. *“Hana."*

His stool skids loudly as he pushes himself up and shoves past ornery football fans to claim the spot closest to the central holovid. Cameras from two drones and three helicopters circle the advancing MEKA unit, one panning up to the omnic itself. The adaptive Colossi is still very far away, shrouded in oceanic storms, a veil of dark clouds that make it look like an actual sea monster -- something straight out of Hanzo’s childhood stories. Far worse than the one he saw on the way to Ho Chi Minh; horrors designing horrors.

“Turn up the volume!”

The human bartender blinks at his six-armed metal coworker, who wordlessly slides the volume to max.

“-- gotten a visual yet, but we’re waiting for intel from the ground. Comparing these images with those from the previous attack, we can safely say that this omnic is the same construct that the MEKA team has been battling for years. Samantha Gyeung is on Jeju Island, conferring with the air force unit there. Sami?”

Suddenly Hanzo isn’t alone in his attention. The entire bar has taken notice; people wander in from the lounge and the deck in sporadic patterns, like moths to a just-lit lantern. The flashing holovid projects light onto dozens of rapt faces. Somewhere near Hanzo's shoulder, the well-dressed stranger is also staring up, but he is not aware of their presence. No one is really aware of anything but the feed.

Then the video cuts to a young woman standing in a military facility, where uniformed soldiers work at holographic arrays with tight-lipped urgency. “Seoul can give us no details at this time as to the exact updated weapons capabilities of the Colossi, but we can clearly see that the new additions are extensive. The MEKA unit is on its way to intercept -- we have aerial footage of that now. José?”

A shaky camera hovers from the open side of a loud chopper, a reporter’s voice coming high and anxious over the din: “The MEKA unit has engaged! You can see that soldiers Jae-Eun

Kwon, a.k.a Casino and Seung-Hwa Shi, a.k.a Overlord, are attempting to distract the Titan from the right, likely employing their ankle-break maneuver! Star pilot Hana Song, a.k.a. D.Va, seems to be targeting its -- hold on, we're experiencing visibility issues! Please bear with us!"

The image blurs with digital snow.

Hanzo gestures wildly to the human bartender, "What is this? Why is this what we're watching?"

The six-armed omnic looks back and forth from the screen to Hanzo. "What?"

The human tender throws up his hands, "Man, what do you want from me --?"

"Turn on her *livestream,* you imbeciles!"

Both tenders give each other confused looks. Two of the omnic's arms shrug.

Hanzo climbs over the bar-top and pushes past them both. Ignoring shouts of amusement and protest alike, he hunches over his phone, tapping as fast as he can. Then he climbs onto the back counter, nudges aside bottles of tequila with his knee, and touches a button on the holovid's base. A light *ping* tells him that his phone's signal has been accepted.

He hops down just as the screen switches. Now they are inside Hana's mech. Her bright voice pierces the bar, the lounge -- the entire watching world.

"HaHA! You *thought?"* A camera on Hana's headset shows her gloved hands wrestling joysticks just beyond her teal-tinted windshield. The Colossi looms through the rain, only sparse pieces of it visible at any given time. She's barraging its flank with gunfire, avoiding missiles with miraculous precision. "Another one for my highlight reel!"

Hanzo is wide-eyed. His drink sits forgotten along with everyone else's. A couple college students in the back let out a whooping cry that disperses the tension, spreads a looser, electric energy throughout the crowd, but the archer doesn't seem to partake. He is as fixed as the tiled floor.

A smaller video in the top right of the feed is from a camera at her mech's back, showing the view behind her, where other units flit past in rocket-fueled streaks. "Gonna show this 'bot who's boss in just a sec," Hana's small hands fly lightning-fast over the joystick's controls, weaving computations that make Hanzo's head spin, "Issuing full power to shields! I'm going in, guys. D.Mon, King -- cover me!"

Hana's hands move with an inconceivable mind-body connection as she isolates and blocks every single oncoming missile. The Colossi's horizontal eyes, like a goat's eyes, bright blood red, are the only other light source through the stormy South China Sea, turning with thunderous *click-click-clicks* as it seems to focus in on Hana. As if it recognizes her. Hanzo can *hear* the huge grin on her face as she blasts her machine guns at the Colossi's elbow joints, which are easily bigger than five of her mechs put together.

When her camera gives a massive shudder, Hanzo realizes that the Colossi is still advancing through the sea.

“Kill it, Hana!” Another MEKA soldier shouts in Korean -- Hanzo barely understands enough to get the gist. “If it makes it to the bay, they’ll have to launch! We gotta take it out now!”

“You worry too much,” she sighs dramatically. A massive energy beam erupts from the omnic’s crown but Hana hops, rolls down its forearm, and boosts across to its opposite elbow. She lands without even trying to find her footing. Hanzo can’t even figure out how she knew where the other arm would be. How she knew the exact moment to cut thrusters.

In English, “Whoop! Almost got me, there! Heheh!”

The archer snarls through his teeth: *"kuso-gaki."* His entire body is shaking with tension, but he goes unnoticed by the rest of the crowd, who are gasping and cheering in turns. Some have watched Hana fight the *kaiju* before. Some are experiencing it for the first time. No one in that bar knows what Hanzo knows and is currently agonizing over: that Hana doesn’t just think this is a game, she thinks this is a *show* . Her mech is racing up to the Colossi’s shoulder like a beetle over an elephant and she’s *laughing,* carrying on like she knows exactly which phrases will make for good hashtags. She isn’t irresponsible -- she knows all too well the weight her shoulders carry -- but she does not even consider the fact that she may die. That she might *lose* . Hanzo can’t tell if she knows and doesn’t care, or if she is just that good.

It’s torturous, and *beautiful* . He feels like he’s watching a master martial artist or a brilliant musician. He feels like he’s seeing everything on a glorious stage, like the exploding missiles are just so many flashing cameras. Like the red glow off the Colossi’s eyes are just massive spotlights. Like the pouring rain and howling wind are just the same cheering crowd. The *chug-chug-chug* of her automatic gunfire might as well be the jump of his own racing pulse, but he cannot tear his eyes away.

“To those of you just tuning in,” Hana chirps, as if keeping an eye on the chatroom counter as well as the omnic, “This is Hana Song and the world-class Seoul MEKA unit! You guys wanna see something sweet?"

Hanzo hasn’t been this keyed up since watching Genji in the dojo: swords clashing, blood spraying, his brother’s voice hoarse with frenzied shouts. He hadn’t shown emotion then.

"Hope your connection is solid, because I’m about to break the internet!”

He balls a fist and upper-cuts the air. *“Ganbatte!”*

Like a nimble hare, Hana leaps onto the Colossi’s head. She uses her mech’s pointed foot to flip open a compartment full of white light. She pours bullets into the opening, but then snaking silver cords whip out of nowhere, making her kick away and fall backwards. Plummeting towards the sea, her screen is suddenly full of flashing lightning and oncoming missiles -- but her shield is depleted.

"Nalaganda!" She rockets upwards, faster than ever, and dodges the Colossi's arm at the last minute. The missiles go off on its own shell like festival fireworks.

The bar erupts into pockets of shouting, clapping. People on all sides are crowding forward. Hanzo is a still island amidst the throng.

Then Hana shoots up the Colossi's front and onto its wire-laden neck. Her screen erupts into nothing but blinding sparks as she shreds the omnic's throat at point-blank range.

Everyone is on their feet, screaming at the holovid. Hands in the air.

But in the rearview camera is the omnic's incoming hand, flying towards her as fast and as large as a jumbo jet.

Hanzo bellows over the din, *"Abunai!"*

Then she crushes the ejection switch, her cockpit flies opens and she launches herself out. Her mech glows with the brightness of a supernova just as the omnic crushes the unit into its own throat. A thunderous explosion, a digital screech, and the screen flips to digital snow.

Hanzo's blood goes still.

The bar emits a collective gasp. Hanzo has never worked his phone faster; he switches from the dead feed back to the international news channel as fast as his fingers will move.

Then the reporter in the helicopter appears, screaming into his microphone:

"-- DONE IT! SHE'S DONE IT, THE OMNIC IS RETREATING!"

The camera zooms in on a red-and-black MEKA unit, where a smoke-blasted Hana is riding atop the cockpit with two V-signs and a thousand-watt smile.

Hanzo punches the sky, *"YOSH!"*

The entire rooftop erupts. People grab each other from all sides, shaking and hugging and cackling with glee. Drinks spill and glasses crash as everyone deafens each other in joyful chaos.

As winded and emotional as a sportscaster during playoffs, the journalist goes on. "The omnic has submerged, but the team is unharmed and returning home! Hana Song has stunned us once again! She is...s-she is truly the pride of her country!"

Hanzo blocks his eyes with two raised fists, digging them into his sockets as he tilts his chin to the ceiling.

He stays like that until someone seizes him by the shoulder.

"Hey! What's your deal, man?" The sharply-dressed person Hanzo spoke to earlier is grinning ear-to-ear. "Do you like... *know* her?"

Hanzo is too euphoric to be withholding. “Yes. Yes, I know her.”

“Bullshit! What the fuck? That’s bullshit!” Those gold molars flash with every word.

He straightens his shirt and drops his gaze. “It is the truth. I do not care if --”

“If you can prove that you know *Hana fucking Song* , I’ll buy you free drinks for the rest of the night.”

Without hesitating, Hanzo taps his phone and pulls from the Gibraltar photoset: a dressed-down Hana perched effortlessly on his big shoulders, one eye squeezed shut, miming shooting an arrow at the camera. A shadow blemishes the corner of the photo: Cassidy’s thumb.

The stranger grabs it and the lights on their throat erupt into hot cinnabar as they raise his phone to show the entire bar:

“HEY! THIS GUY KNOWS HANA SONG!”

Hanzo freezes as every pair of eyes lands on him and another unified cheer shakes his eardrums. A man ten inches taller hugs him from the side. An old woman drags his hand into the air and announces a round of drinks for the entire lounge, igniting even more exhilaration. The six-armed bartender throws on a bass-heavy beat and the tropical lights start flashing pink-and-teal: Hana's colors. In the back of his mind, Hanzo thinks this would be a perfect time for an assassin to stick a knife in his flank, but he can't bring himself to care. He finds a large cocktail thrust into his hand and doesn’t hesitate -- he downs it, slaps the glass on the counter and grabs the shoulder of whoever is grabbing his, like he’s back at the old bar with the brothers. The joy generated by Hana’s battle erupts inside him like a chain of firecrackers, carries him through the night on rocket-fueled bliss; another fighter gone mad on the thrill of his comrade’s victory.

In the bleeding back of his mind, he knows that he has no right to be proud of her, but pride radiates nonetheless.

Hours pass in a high-octane blur. The euphoria rises, peaks, and falls in patches, until the dance floor is no longer a teaming organism and the majority of party-goers have drifted back to their own (and each others’) rooms. The music softens into blissed-out electronica and the archer, eyes bleary with drink and lips flushed with second-hand lipstick, eventually winds up slumped on a stiff couch in the lounge area: just him, a cigarette, and a glass of melting ice.

His bourbon-addled brain is contemplating the unique beauty of whirling smoke when the thought occurs, without any executive functioning to stop it, that right now, he would really like to see Cole Cassidy. He was always so vocal in his support of others, so enthusiastic for his team in his own way. Hanzo can just see the big man having the time of his life, creating even more joy for himself and everyone around him, sunning the world with his warm eyes

and good nature. Causing a scene and wearing himself out on his own raucous energy, pretending he has no limits. He can see the two of them eventually stumbling to this couch, shoulders touching, thighs brushing, simmering in the electric pool of unspoken attraction. Sharing a smoke, maybe a kiss. Their mutual status as anachronistic outcasts.

He remembers the first time they drank together, the playful roughhousing and drunken banter. Cassidy trying to help him up, pointing Hanzo back to his dorm. Hanzo insisting that Cassidy owes him ten-times over for the sin of flirting.

“Bad karma, cowboy,” he mutters to no one, trying to take a sip from the glass he has forgotten is empty.

Everything from Gibraltar feels like a dream. Tangerine sunsets and Tangiers smoke. Sea salt breezes and little yellow flowers. Indigo nights and bad whiskey. Faces young and old, contorting from subjective memories to two-dimensional photos -- cartoonish, vague symbols. All of it whirling together, unreal and unreliable. Like everything that happened on the rock was just some film he watched in his youth: characters and images impressed upon his mind but utterly intangible. Projections. Digital photos sent by a ghost. Something he can hardly see and could never grasp.

It feels a lot like after he left the clan. Gibraltar is slowly taking its place alongside Hanamura as another paradise he fucked up and ditched.

With a dark chuckle, he remembers -- he stole that joke from a drunken Cassidy. *I'm gonna write an autobiography someday, Shimada. Or, get someone else to write it. What d’you think of this for a title: ‘Home: Or, Places I Fuck Up and Ditch.’ Got a real nice hook to it, don’t it? Could be a bestseller. World's just waitin' for a good Overwatch tell-all.*

Those laughing eyes. Always squinting, always hidden beneath loose hair and crow’s feet and the shadow of his hat. *They’re so wrinkled,* Hanzo thinks with an amused smirk, *yet eternally youthful.* Clever and effusive. Warm as a sun-touched glass of whiskey. Cole Cassidy single-handedly taught Hanzo the exquisite beauty of the color brown and all her infinite tones. His eyes are flecked like the grain of wood, striped with dark growth lines. Crinkled with years of laughter and cynicism alike. *Wabi-sabi.* A study in Western contradictions. Funny and maddening, like one of his riddles. The desert fox with no den, cactus thorns in his fur. Crushing scorpions between his grinning fangs.

For what feels like the thousandth time, Hanzo attempts to rip his thoughts into a new direction. But this time, the spiral has a power of its own. Kinetic energy builds momentum until he’s drowning in feeling. Cole’s carefree whistling blows straight through the cavern of his mind, a haunting, echoing harmony to his constant baseline of self-inflicted barbs: *you abandoned him. You abandoned all of them, just like you abandoned Genji. You have inflicted wounds that can never be healed.*

On the television, Hana is speaking with a reporter. Hanzo, mindlessly drunk, hears it only in patches. Most of it are prepared lines, like the canned responses that star athletes dole out in post-game interviews. Hana's winning grin and puckish attitude go far with the interviewer, though; he can read that without listening. Ever the charmer. The world wrapped around her pinky finger.

Then the light-throated person from before (Vasu, he remembers their name,) falls into the seat at his left. He's too drunk to move his head to look at them.

"You okay, Hanzo? Looks like you're about to grow gills."

A rumbling grunt: "m'fine."

They lean back and cross their legs at the knee. "I don't think you are. What's wrong? Drink too much?"

Hanzo groans; what is it about him that draws brash, intrusive strangers into his orbit? Vasu's strident voice is like symbols in his ears. His heavy gaze falls to his lower right, he shrugs, and his tone contradicts every word he manages to shove out of his smoke-scarred throat: "I am fine. Just thinking."

"About?"

He suddenly glares at them. "None of your business -- *no offense."*

"Hey, woah," Vasu pats his shoulder, rough and warm, "Take it easy. I know that look, man. I've been around. Man or woman?"

"...Man."

"Want to talk about it?"

Hanzo knows that he most definitely does not want to talk about it, but his mouth is moving on its own. "He sent me photos from… when we were together. Out of nowhere. With no additional message." He scratches his beard, rotates his shoulder joint. "I messaged him back. Twice. No response."

"Aloof, huh? Man, I can *relate."*

Hanzo narrows his eyes; usually he's the one being accused of aloofness. "Yes. But I… behaved badly. I deserve his distrust." His last conversation with Cassidy reverberates in his head like an obnoxious gong: *been a bad man for too long* . He can already feel the headache forming. "But I want to talk to him about it."

"So call him!"

"He should be calling *me* . I left messages." Hanzo swipes out his palm, as if gesturing to a present Cassidy across the room. "It is *his* turn."

"Oh, sorry, your highness," Vasu wheezes, "I didn't know there were *rules* ."

Hanzo straightens his back, juts his chin. “He *should* call me. It is the right thing to do.”

“Man, listen . There aren't any right moves or wrong moves. Don’t treat it like a game. If you wanna talk to him, call his ass. Apologize, don’t apologize, whatever -- just *start* something. Screw the ‘right thing.’ You can do everything ‘right’ and still end up, you know. Ruining your life.”

And just like that, he can feel the weight of a *katana* back in his hands. The perfect steel, that perfect balance. His fingers grip around nothing. His chest goes hollow. Vasu calmly drinks at his side as he sinks, spirals.

Then his swimming eyes accidentally refocus on a holovid screen. He blinks as if through a fog, only tuning in when he hears the journalist ask: “anything you want to say to your fans tonight?”

He watches Hana smile in a way he's never seen before. It’s something he has a hard time recognizing, and the alcohol makes it worse, but he’ll remember it come morning: humility.

“Just, you know… Remember to take it easy. It’s hard to make time for my family and friends, but I've been trying more lately, and it's... it’s really paying off. It’s important to relax sometimes! And to accept help from others.” Her eyes fall, her voice grows softer. “I would like it if everyone would remember that."

Then Vasu pipes up: “Maybe you’re just, you know… scared?”

And suddenly there’s no question of what he has to do. Hanzo rises from the couch and stumbles away.

“Hana Song wouldn’t be scared,” Vasu calls after him, “Hana Song would call that guy!” Then they lean back on the couch and toast to the air, muttering under their breath: “I love you, Hana Song.”

On an isolated stretch of balcony in a plush white lounge chair, a deadly assassin stares down at his phone. A number hovers at the top of his screen. A green button waits for his thumb. A voice in his head rattles off an increasingly harsh litany: *do it, you coward, now, do it, you fucking coward, do it, do it now--*

He hits Call and holds the phone up to his ear. He almost hangs up on the third ring. He actually pulls the phone away when the answering machine picks up. His addled mind races back and forth over dry tracks. What if this really isn’t Cassidy? What if it is? What could he possibly say to explain himself? Why does he even want--

Beep .

“Cole.” Hanzo’s voice hits his own ears as if for the first time: hoarse, drunk, beyond exhausted. But he has to keep going.

Mumbled: “...if this is even is Cole...”

He takes a breath, coughs into his fist. “I saw Hana’s livestream and… I…” His throat closes up; he has to punch out the words. “I wanted to speak to you. I am in… India. If you sent those photos, if you are hearing this... I am in India and I want to talk.” He knows he’s slurring his words, but presses on, ever-more insistent, “If you are not Cole, then… I am still in India, and I still want to talk. Call me.”

After a pause in which he does not breathe, he adds in a rush: “Remember when I told you that you owe me ten? You do not owe me anymore. I owe you.”

Another throat-clearing cough. “Call me.”

He’s never felt relief like he does when he hangs up. The phone falls to the deck, he falls back in the chair, and the images flood without end. The gunslinger in his red serape, face smeared with blood. The swifts circling the comm tower alongside black helicopters. Little yellow flowers whipping in the wind and then catching fire. Distant explosions, a howling Levanter, six-cylinder gunshot mingled with something unholy and wild, like a fox’s scream. A military dorm full of beach sand and discarded *ishi-dōrō* , a fluttering note written in lavish cursive: *do not follow me.*

The six-armed omnic turns off the holovids first. People at the bar lift their weary heads and start shuffling away. Then she finds the equalizer and gradually turns down the music. A few sleepy dancers stop swaying and drift out hand-in-hand. Then she switches off the whirling spotlights and flips on service halogens until the last of the stragglers finally take the hint and head out. She watches them leave with soft digital eyes. *You don't have to go home, but...*

Her co-worker punched out hours ago; she closes up alone. There’s much more of a mess than usual, but it doesn’t take long -- it never does. That’s why management always has her do it. The closing shift isn’t terrible (automated ‘bots take care of most of the actual cleaning), but she does wish they’d let her take a few daytime shifts once in awhile. She does want *some* evenings to herself, especially now, after the MEKA battle. It's a lot to process. She never seems to get time enough to process.

With the register closed and the bar locked up, she walks out to the balcony. The wind has picked up and the light pollution seems to have lessened. Her long-distance vision isn’t the best, but sometimes she can make out a constellation or two. With study, she's been able to recognize more and more. She walks up to the pool's edge and rests her three-pronged digits on the railing, sighing out an auto-tuned drone as she tilts her glassy ocular ports to the sky.

Then she notices that there's a man in the pool -- the same man who'd climbed over the bar earlier. He's stripped bare, clothes cast across the tile, floating at the edge of one of the pool's extended petals. He's leaning over his folded arms and staring thirty stories down. Water rushes past his shoulders to a hundred-foot drop, where a lower-level pool catches it. But if *he* decides to climb over the edge...

He must be very drunk. She has to help.

As she slowly approaches, two towels in two steel hands, she can hear him talking to himself in garbled Japanese:

"Bastard. I told you not to follow me. I *told* you."

Chapter End Notes

For those of you wondering: I MISS COLE TOO LOL. He'll be back soon and better than ever. The next chapter will not be as long as this one, and much faster, as we're nearing the end of Part II.

Little exchange between Genji and Hanzo at the end there was inspired by Moses and Ramses from Prince of Egypt!

Thank you so so so sos ooso sosooso much for your generous and lovely comments -- every single one brightens my day! Writing this story has been a blast on it's own but the process is 100x more enjoyable knowing that other people are along for the ride.

Did I ever link my twitter here? https://twitter.com/DesLaMoto

NEXT UP: the climax of Hanzo's journey (Mumbai, a hair-cut, and a not-that-mysterious French assassin.)

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hanzo winds through the last, roughest miles of his journey.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the bottoming out of Hanzo's journey, but it rounds up towards the end. He's gonna be ok, folks!

Warning: alcoholism, drug use, addiction, suicidal thoughts, blood/violence, overdose, manic-depressive spiraling. Yes, this is the darkest chapter yet. It doesn't get too physically visceral, just emotionally dark.

Also—if someone sees something that I should definitely tag, don't hesitate to let me know! I try to be comprehensive with the warnings but sometimes I miss stuff as I do not beta these shits at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed,

nothing between me and the white fire of the stars

but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths...

—Mary Oliver

Hanzo always returns to Tokyo on Christmas Eve. He wanders old haunts, checks in on old faces. He takes care of the few things he still bothers to take care of, buys a traditional cake and eats his fill and tosses the rest. Then he flies out the next morning, if it's safe for him to fly, and resumes his exile on some other part of the world. The trip is habit, another ritual, this one tied to his memories of family -- one of the few moments that were about them, not about the clan. Though even that separation was an illusion, one he even realized at the time. There were many illusions in his life; at least this one he could create for himself.

Hanzo has no plans to return to Japan this year. He doesn't even plan to move from these stone steps. Reclining on the *ghat* at Varanasi, looking out at a sepia-tinted sunset over a wide brown river, he can't see the point in doing anything at all. His muscles have been aching for days and he suspects that, should he attempt to get up, he will have to admit that there is something seriously wrong with him.

Scientists have studied the Ganges for decades, but never discovered anything the monks didn't already know. Her waters serve as a conduit for the country's memory. Pilgrims come from all over to offer tribute and wash away their sins. Hanzo himself has already waded to his hips and rubbed mud into his sore shins, but he didn't stay for long. It may be said that a dip in the river facilitates the liberation from the cycle of life and death, but he still sees the bodies of dead monkeys along with other modern detritus caught in boat motors and logs for the funeral pyres. Like most of the countries he's visited since leaving Gibraltar, central India is tropical -- everything decays quickly. A different kind of winter.

There are also small children tossing chrysanthemums, which makes him think of the brothers. Some of them used to tattoo the flowers on their arms and chests after the more traditional samurai, demons, and dragons. They knew that, when they finally died for the clan, there would be no one around to lay flowers on their graves.

Orange-robed omnics are here, too, chanting mantras both in Sanskrit and their own digital language. Their sparse bodies resemble that of the ascetics meditating on the shore. Hanzo watches their metal ribs expand with each deliberate breath and muses: do they even have lungs? Is mimicking the gesture enough to achieve whatever enlightenment they hope for? Is it mere programmed belief that brings them peace, a smoke-and-mirrors facsimile of whatever the yogis experience for real?

Zenyatta would fit right in here. The Shambali have made the news since Kolkata, irritating Hanzo every time he sees one of their empty-eyed gazes from a holovid. Genji hasn't called since Myanmar and the elder brother is *not* going to reach out first. He hasn't forgotten how Genji disparaged his profession, then hung up on him when he was trying to tell him about the French assassin. He's tired -- tired of trying, tired of being the only mature one. *If the Sparrow wants to call, he will.*

He tugs his head-scarf until his face is less visible from the sides. It's only a matter of time before he meets this killer, especially after his successful contract in Kolkata. His resurgence into that world, once mere rumor, is now like a large stone dropped into a small pond; the ripples will stir up something unsavory. If not rivals, then former enemies. If not former enemies, then new ones. Attacks will come from unseen angles and he must prepare for the inevitability.

But how to prepare, when he can't even bring himself to get up?

The sun continues to fall. Going for his gourd, Hanzo notices a large mural: a multi-headed cobra hovering over the shoulders of the Buddha, protecting him from the elements. He takes a drink and scoffs: *why protect a god?* Pain is the best lesson, and gods have to learn more than anyone.

What he'd give for a snake bite right now -- something quick and jarring to bring him back to reality, force him into action. He thinks of the old zen masters of his youth, their infectious *kōans* : what is the sound of one hand clapping? He'd never told Cassidy the other half of that story; how oftentimes the old *rōshi* would slap him, trip him, or hit him with whatever was laying around at the time; harsh surprises to interrupt his attempts to secure any rational understanding.

A harsh sigh exits his nostrils. He has more than a rational understanding when it comes to Cassidy.

The memory of his drunken voicemail is foggy enough to obscure clear analysis, yet intense enough to douse him with shame. He fasted for a week at the temple of Bodh Gaya, trying to punish himself for the night of foolish revelry, but all he has to show for it is the pain in his muscles and a persistent lack of appetite. The deed remains, as hard and tangible as the gourd in his hand.

But, as Hanzo stares through the approaching twilight, he can at least savor the balm of finality: Cole Cassidy is gone. He never answered and never will. He sent those photos as a good-bye and nothing more. Whether intended as a slow-release poison or a simple, thanks-for-the-good-times farewell (Hanzo's inclined to believe the former, given his own sins), the result is the same. The closure may be artificial, but he's finally ready to let it go. Not as sudden as a snake bite, but equally real.

Except he can't help but brood: the egoistic, inwardly-winding analysis born from years of habitual self-improvement (or self-flagellating). Had he been *asleep* in Gibraltar? Was he manufacturing this attachment out of present-day loneliness, or did the gunslinger really have that deep of an effect on him? Did he, by operating under the assumption that no one wanted him there (and not wanting to be there himself), fail to notice the impressions left by this man? Impressions that now perforate his spirit more and more with each passing day, like waves upon rock?

Hanzo takes another drink. The saké burns his throat, softens the ache in his muscles and mind. *At least you got your comeuppance,* he thinks. *He believes you're a Talon spy. They all do.*

Then his phone buzzes in his bow case. It's been doing that a lot for the past couple days, but he hasn't been inclined to answer.

Just for the distraction, he fishes it out.

Rune:

Helloooo Hanzo

New job just came up. Two weeks, Cape Town.

Warm enough for you?

Hanzo? Answer me, oyabun.

Hellooooooooo Hanzooooooooo

Okay, this isn't funny. Answer me or I'm giving

the job to someone else.

omg. Hanzo where are you? I'm seriously

worried now. Talk to me.

A dozen or so messages follow the same line. Hanzo rolls his eyes to the sunset, huffs. Scratches his overgrown beard.

He's smoked half a cigarette before he gets around to typing out a reply.

Hanzo:

I am taking a break for an indeterminate amount of time. I will let you know when I want new contracts.

Rune:

What??? Why?

Is this because of the Moscow job?

Hanzo you can't just ignore me for over a week and then say you're taking a break. I thought you were dead.

Hanzo:

It is a personal matter.

Rune:

You are impossible you know that??

You can't keep pulling this shit Hanzo. It's unprofessional. It makes clients nervous and it pisses me off. I think you should seriously reconsider.

Hanzo:

I think I should do whatever the fuck I want.

Hanzo shoves the phone into his pocket. He knows he's in the wrong. He knows that he shouldn't display his temper to Rune, especially over text; it's beneath him, and undeserved, and their association is strained as it is. But he's too tired and sore to censor himself and he's not about to reveal an illness he can't himself explain. He can't share this weakness with anyone, least of all Rune.

Another orange-robed omnic enters the river, this one missing an arm. She bows and rises, lifting and spilling water over and over, keeping time with her mantras. The motion is so well-practiced, so reminiscent of his own well-worn rituals: maintaining his bow, making tea, going through his *kata* … Watching her should be its own kind of meditation, but it's not. He can no longer see the point in meditating, or taking another contract, or pursuing any of the goals he once did to hone his status as a fighter without peer. He's tried to resume his life as it was before Genji's resurrection, but he can't. None of it serves him anymore.

But he also can't think of what else he should do.

Then he raises his chin, defiant: *this malaise won't last* . Like the soreness in his muscles, this apathy will give way to something better. He just needs a challenge, some goal to spark the ambition he knows is still there. If he can't fight off would-be assassins, he'll utilize his other skills: disguise, stealth. He'll lay low and keep moving until his body recovers. All he needs is a path.

Hanzo tosses his cigarette and takes out his phone again. He opens up a satellite map and zooms in on his own location. He has been to India many times over the years, but hardly feels he knows it well; it is vast, teeming. Impossible to grasp and yet ripe with potential. Ever since the Crisis, a plethora of companies have swept in to address the needs of an uprooted populace, and many companies (Vishkar among them) have found ample success. Transportation alone has seen an unprecedented boom; trains and buses and hover-vehicles of all kinds track the country's landscape as diverse and plentiful as the species of the earth.

A few quick searches reveal multiple databases with schedules, prices, transfers. He could plot a wayward trajectory across the country, keep to the cheaper transports, blend in with the travelers and emigrants that pack the stations daily. *Like finding a needle in a haystack* , as the gunslinger used to say.

Hanzo bites his cheek at how easily the man's aphorisms slip into his thought-stream. At least the hard travel will wear his perforations smooth. It always has.

But he has no destination in mind. His journey must be erratic, so no destination is truly needed, but he can't think of proceeding without at least arranging to be somewhere by Christmas. *And,* he reminds himself with some irritation, *if Genji does call, I should have a final station to relay.*

The blue screen waits for an answer. Hanzo finishes the saké.

A big city would be best. Big cities always fill him with energy, remind him of his purpose, his responsibilities. But which?

A journey without a destination -- why does this feel familiar?

He groans, remembering: the hovering *ishi-dōrō.* Too far apart to make a clear path. One step could either lead him onto something new or back into the past. Back into what Genji -- his sole responsibility in this world, the only true duty he can name -- has tasked him with overcoming.

That night at the shrine comes back even clearer than the dusky river before him. Shimada Genji, a feather encased in metal, back from the dead with an impossible command, like the digital arbiter of the gods: *forgive yourself.*

“Fine, Genji,” Hanzo mutters aloud. “I forgive myself.”

He looks around, listening to the drone of the river.

Then he snorts, directs his phone’s map to the coast furthest away from Kolkata, and zooms in on the first large dot he sees.

Mumbai . Good enough.

Then he shuts off his phone before he’s tempted to look at the photos. His drunken attention settles on the water: the flowers, the oil-lamps, believers both human and non. The sun has set and the stars have come out, mimicking the floating orange dots below. An unfair reflection, but a beautiful one.

Then Hanzo feels a stab of sickening fondness, another unfair reflection: nights with Cassidy at Gibraltar’s cliff edge, sharing drinks under a different starry vault. The gunslinger’s smooth voice rolling over old stories, crude jokes, clever quips. Honest questions, quiet answers. Warm orange lights behind them where the rest of the team laughs and eats, ignorant of the two old criminals exchanging meaningful looks under the indigo shadow. Salty night breezes. Cassidy's softly whipping serape.

Hanzo knows he has to get up, but he doesn’t want to break this bittersweet limbo. He wants to rest beside the path; to be without time. He feels something waiting for him, some darkness within. Something waiting in the unconscious he’s been ignoring through weeks of persistent insomnia.

Somewhere nearby, a bar has turned on their night-music: ethereal jazz. Like an ancient radio floating through space. Somehow he feels like he’s heard it before. Shanghai, maybe? Nagasaki? He’s been to so many places, seen so many things. The thought of living forever, an endless accumulation of memories, washes over him like a childhood nightmare. Monsters under the bed. Somehow he can feel his old self, years ago, staring at constellations through smog and light pollution. The same bow at his back, the same questions in his throat. How many times has he imagined himself as a celestial body without orbit, hurtling through the black? How many times has he looked up at the sky and seen the bow of Sagittarius, even when he wasn’t looking for it?

By the time he heads out to that bar, the robed omnic is still at it. She’s too engrossed in her ritual to notice one of the other bathers leave the river, wring out their robe, and follow Hanzo’s path.

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The train to Lucknow breaks down in the middle of nowhere, so Hanzo leaves the station and buys an old Royal Enfield from a mechanic in the village. He also buys used clothes in the local style. He buys a new case for his bow, too -- the kind once used by painters to carry large pieces of canvas. He even buys black kohl and lines his eyes, though there's little chance of him being mistaken for a local. It's just something old-Hanzo would never consider, and so gets added to the disguise. *It's for the more spiritually inclined* , the shop woman told him. *Wards off the Evil Eye.*

At the town center, he checks himself in the mirror of the bike and finds that he recognizes himself a little less than the day before. He sips his *masala chai* with a satisfied smirk; it's been a long time since he had to resort to stealth. The thrill of danger, of utilizing old skills and finding himself still an expert, almost makes up for the pain in his muscles.

But the village notice board is a patchwork of uncertainty. The usual heat wave warnings are up: what to do in case of heat stroke, notices of delayed shipments, drought precautions. There are locusts cutting through the northwest; he'd already heard passengers talking about it on the train. Luckily, he'll be traveling behind the swarm.

Then there's the usual warnings of a militant omnic group that signs themselves with the Hindi symbol for the Untouchables: an insulting throwback to the country's centuries-old, now-banned caste system. After the Crisis, Vishkar developers deemed the remaining omnics too chaotic for their new cities and banned them. Most of the other settlements followed suit. After some time passed, most urban areas started admitting omnics, but some rural areas still contain hostile camps of the 'bots who dip their limbs in white. They mostly keep to themselves, but when the weather goes dry, they harass Vishkar caravans and steal supplies. And their ranks are spreading southward.

Hanzo uses his scarf to wipe sweat from his brow. This winter has been unnaturally hot, and heat attracts trouble.

But he likes it. The hardship, the challenge -- it tastes better than apathy. He pulls on his sunglasses and adjusts the scarf around his mouth and nose. Then he starts up the bike and takes off, going way above the speed limit. He lets himself imagine that he's racing Cassidy, who always bragged about what a good rider he was. He's probably cruising down a Mexican highway right now: hair whipping, mouth grinning. Not a care in the world.

Hours pass beneath an unforgiving sun. The locust-pillaged fields create unhindered winds on an already dusty highway. Hanzo passes a variety of vehicles on their way to deliver supplies to less-fortunate farmers who have no money for pest deterrents or omnic aid. In the opposite direction pass small planes, hoping to wipe out the swarm before they can cause more devastation. A few Vishkar hovercars, sleek and silvery, cut through the brown haze like flying fish through a muddy river.

Hanzo's irritation lights up every time they pass. Bad enough is the dust and humidity -- the Vishkar glares are an outright road hazard. But he presses on, determined to reach the next village in time for the evening train. *I've had worse roads. And it's not as if I don't deserve --*

Electric pain tears up his left thigh. The muscle spasms. It's like the dragons, their electric touch -- like when he was younger and couldn't control their rage. A transport rushes past, kicks up dust, and his vision turns white.

He gasps. His eyes miss the patch of gravel, but his front tire doesn't. He wipes out, skids across the road, and narrowly misses getting run over by a shrieking truck. His bike keeps going before it crashes into a ditch full of brambles and hisses like a punctured balloon.

Hanzo peels open his unshielded eyes at the bright blue sky and groans.

The truck that almost hit him turns around and pulls up on the shoulder, blocking Hanzo from oncoming traffic. Someone gets out.

He's *never* wiped out like that, not in all his years of handling bikes. And what was that *pain?*

As Hanzo rises to his feet, stiff and aching, a woman puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Kya aap theek hain?"

Hanzo grunts. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

Her face is ruddy and full. Beige eyes bulging, short white hair like a cockatiel. A polo shirt and a potbelly, gloved hands marked with soldering scars and grease. A robotics technician, perhaps.

Or an assassin. You never can tell.

"You went down *hard* , guy. Can you get up?"

Hanzo waves her off and she balks at his impoliteness, but it can't be helped. He spares no one his suspicion; these days, it's his modus operandi.

But as he looks over to her truck, he notices two young girls in the back seat. Her children, or perhaps assistants. Perhaps he misjudged. Or perhaps they are decoys. There's also a small dog barking up front, though Hanzo cannot tell the breed. Nor the exact color. He can't even tell if it's wearing a tag.

He blinks, then realizes: his vision has blurred. More blinking, more rubbing, and still -- he can barely make out the small animal embroidered on the woman's shirt.

The woman, nonplussed, heads for the ditch. "Let's get your bike out."

Shaken, Hanzo marches after her. As they work together to wiggle the bike free of brambles, his mind races through a more thorough physical inventory: his sunglasses and headscarf are now garbage on the side of the road, his jacket is scratched but not ripped, his head is throbbing but not as bad as his muscles, and, yes, his eyes are palpably worse. They don't sting -- this isn't grit nor glare. The world's just a little bit fuzzier than it was before he fell.

He can't help but clench his jaw. Bad enough he has to look over his shoulder every other minute and combat a persistent ache. Now his own eyes are failing him and he --

"Doctor."

Hanzo snaps his gaze to the woman. "Excuse me?"

She points down the road, gestures knife-like, repeating: "Doctor. There's a doctor in the next village. You need to get your head checked." She puts her hands on her hips and looks him over. "Maybe get *everything* checked."

Hanzo squints. He looks across at the blurry horizon, then back at the woman. She seems concerned, yet impatient: *I have* actual *children to look after right now.*

He puts his hands together and bows: "thank you."

Perhaps he should see a doctor; he could get something to keep him going. He can't afford weakness like this, not when there's so much on his tail. No shame in taking prescription drugs if it helps him reach his goal.

The woman sniffs the air as Hanzo passes by. "Uhh… have you been drinking?"

"No." The bike, miraculously, starts up just fine. "But that's a good idea."

A cornucopia of substances lines the innards of the doctor's office: pills, oils, syrups, powders, capsules, creams. An apprentice forms new mixtures for bottling in one corner, a cabinet full of charts in the other. A giant mortar and pestle gleams with fragrant grasses. A

huge spotted cat prowls between hard shadows. Nothing's labeled in a language Hanzo understands, nothing looks familiar. The old doctor himself is something from another world, his off-white coat hanging heavy on his narrow shoulders. He waves Hanzo inside with a flap of fingers and Hanzo sits across on a withered cot.

He frowns at the smoking pile of stones between them. The small pyre turns the already hot room into a smoky furnace, clots in his nostrils. Outside, he can hear women shouting while their kids scream in play. Pain lances once again from his thigh up to his shoulder. He leans in and speaks with his jaw half-clenched: “I need painkillers.”

The old man scans him with shining black eyes. One of those lively hands scratches his own chest, where a faded tattoo covers the sun-scarred skin: a male peacock in full regalia. “For your dreams?”

The archer’s tone is as dry as the locust-pillaged fields: *“what?”*

“You’ve been having powerful dreams lately, yes?” He traces his fingertip along the crease of Hanzo’s permanent frown. “You have tightness here. Your temples are sunken. You make a cave of your body, like this,” he hunches to imitate the archer’s vulture-like posture. “How long do you sleep?"

Hanzo grinds his jaw beneath tight lips. Every inhalation makes him drowsier, like he’s being drugged already. “Four hours, give or take.”

“You have fasted recently?”

“Yes.”

“You drink? Smoke?”

“Yes.”

“You are a fighter.”

“Yes, I train daily --”

“You fight with guilt.” The doctor puts his hand on Hanzo’s stomach, then grips both of his forearms, then touches the pulse at his throat; all before the archer can get over his shock enough to protest. “You hold it in your gut.”

Hanzo bares his teeth. “I am not here to have my fortune told. Is there a *real* pharmacy in this village?”

The apprentice scowls at Hanzo from the corner, but the old man continues unperturbed. He leans to the side and shuffles his hand around a deep basket. “Take two drops daily before eating.” He hands Hanzo a small amber-glass bottle, a light film of red dust covering a plain white label. “With big meals.”

The archer takes the bottle. Nothing on the label removes his ignorance. “What is this?”

“Killer of pain.” The doctor brushes his hand through the pyre smoke.

The archer rubs his eyes, smudging the kohl even more. “My eyes are also --”

“Yes, this will help with eyes, too.”

Hanzo frowns doubtfully. “How much?”

“Take it and go.” The old man waves him off, finally putting an iron lid on the pyre. “You will feel worse, then better."

Hanzo leaves a few rupees anyway.

He bursts from the small office and a startled yelp surprises him. The gathered women are recoiling from his presence, walking to the other side of the street with pointed glares. Hanzo looks at them, reminded of the Evil Eye, and rubs his own again. At this point, his kohl is smeared enough to look like a bandit's mask.

Then a storm of nostalgia sweeps through his mind like a waking dream: a hard spring storm back in Hanamura. His guard holds up a black umbrella. An expensive raincoat rests on his squared shoulders. He can feel the weight of the coat, smell the rain on the pines. He is confronting the older sisters of a competitor, some business associate acting against his interests. He keeps his sunglasses on, smokes inside their home. He tells them that their brother will die if he does not follow the code.

He sees the same fear and repulsion on these women now. Even though they do not know who he is. Even though he is wearing layers of local textiles instead of a tailored black suit. Even though there are many years and hundreds of thousands of miles between him and the gangster prince who never left his home without a sword.

Enraged, Hanzo stalks back to his bike. The amber-glass bottle opens easy and two drops deposit down his throat before he heads west.

He tries to forget the doctor and the women, but their eyes stick to his own like the burnt impression of the sun. Like an ear-worm -- like that childish song the cowboy used to hum in softer hours: *you are my sunshine, my only sunshine…*

Hanzo opens his eyes wide against the wind until they produce stinging tears. It clears his vision just enough to keep him moving.

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“Who sent you?”

High noon in the marketplace outside Aligarh. Scattered fruits and vegetables litter the street alongside streaks of Hanzo’s own blood. A sloppy gash mirrors the tattoo on his opposite breast and his red hands grasp the white throat of yet another assassin.

Someone within the circle of frightened villagers calls for the police. The sun is boiling his adrenaline along with cheap booze and the doctor’s medicine: an explosive mixture just waiting for the wrong spark.

Hanzo holds the edge of his arrow to his attacker’s throat. “Who the fuck sent you!?”

“I don’t know,” the man croaks through broken teeth, “I never saw them. I got the contract through a third party, I swear. I *swear.* ”

Pain rockets up Hanzo’s spine, renders him rigid. Panic spreads throughout the market like a kerosene fire, turning frightened spectators into an accusatory mob. Police are coming. The dust has settled for far too long.

It would probably be fine to let this man go, Hanzo knows. He knows that the man would probably return unsuccessful to his employer, who would then just hire someone else. Hanzo can see him wallowing in his failure before simply picking up a less dangerous contract somewhere else.

But Hanzo's patience has drained along with too much of his blood. He tells himself that he is battling too many existing ills to juggle factors he cannot foresee. To permit a luxury as expensive as mercy.

And the assassin’s face is getting blurrier by the second.

So he pushes the arrow through his jugular, twists it out, and flees the scene.

It’s several hours before he feels safe enough to board another train. The ouroboros swigs easier than ever, never leaves his hand. He takes a drink for every dire resolution: to be more unpredictable, more untraceable. Less like himself. Something his own mother wouldn’t recognize. Something to make the mirror startle.

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Cheaper trains travel slower, but the Taj Mahal still passes in a blur. Hanzo's eyes haven't gotten any worse, but even what he can see holds little interest. When he rests his head on the window, gazing through the blemished glass, he has what the gunslinger might call 'a thousand-yard stare' -- a look he attributed to battle-weary soldiers. A defense mechanism to push through the effects of trauma. Hanzo has another word for it: 'stupor,' from the Latin *stupere* , to be stunned or amazed. He remembers the root definition because it seemed contradictory; no one he'd describe being in a stupor ever looked what he'd also call amazed, or even stunned. Not struck by what one has seen, but completely apart from it. Staring through many layers of blemished glass. Nothing like the sharp, seasoned killers he grew up with.

He finished the doctor's medicine before he should have. Then he went to another doctor and received more. None of them try to help beyond refilling his prescription, but they have no cause to; the weaker Hanzo feels, the straighter his back. Just sickly enough to get what he wants. He's always been good at acting as if nothing is wrong. And his disguise is coming along -- the mangled beard, loose hair and deep tan do well in hiding the wear in his face.

In the back of his mind, he thinks of what he might do if his eyes never get any better. Surgery isn't out of the question. Barring that, he can't even imagine what his life would become, and he usually starts drinking before he has to.

It's very early morning when five university students, half-tipsy from holiday revelry, pile into his compartment. Hanzo pulls his layers higher up his body and pretends to be asleep. He hopes it will make them quiet down.

It doesn't. "This is 14, right? Yeah, compartment 14. Wow, these old trains are sooo bad -- I can barely read that."

"God, I can't wait to sit down."

"So, anyway, it was… yesterday, I think? I saw it on the news when I was packing. Said she was fine, tossed out her usual lines: 'this will only strengthen Russia's resolve,' blah blah blah. She didn't seem that shaken up, to be honest. Maybe it's happened before?"

"Man, she's kind of badass. I hope I'm that unflappable when I get to that level."

“Dev, unless you switch from poli-sci to tech and invent a couple mechs, I do not see that happening.”

“Hey, she’s basically more of a political leader than a tech chairman at this point.”

“That reminds me -- did you guys read that article on Satya Vaswani?”

“In Architech? No, but I saw the cover. God, she’s so hot.”

“I wish she’d step on me.”

“... *Anyway* , yeah, it was weird though? It’s like they’re really pushing to make her the face of the company. She’s not just their best architech, she’s got this juicy backstory. Yanked out of the slum and everything.”

“Yeah! Did you know she uses traditional dance techniques to bend hard-light? It’s so cool.”

“Not really the point, Pari. This is just a part of their giant PR campaign to recover from the whole LumeriCo fiasco.”

“They don’t need a giant PR campaign, Anika. Did you see the video of them building cooling centers yesterday? They did all that shit in a *day* . People are alive because of them.”

“It’s so self-serving, though. If I see one more pseudo-commercial for Vishkar laid over actual human tragedy, I swear... Atlas News has been on their ass since those e-mails got leaked and they *still* sell Vishkar airtime. It's all about ratings! I mean, Vaswani, or Symmetra-whatever, didn’t even want to be interviewed -- you could tell she was uncomfortable the whole time. I swear, I’m gonna join the coalition to investigate them.”

“Yeah and, like, at the cooling stations? My girlfriend said they scanned people’s faces before they’d let them at the ice or water. That’s soooo messed up.”

“Dude, Pari. At the university? When they came for recruitment? My friend Kyra said they went into the files of everyone they saw with architect potential, regardless of whether they even attended the showcase or not.”

“It’s true. They sent someone to talk to my parents and I didn’t even know about it. Plus, that hospital center downtown? They watch the rooms. I couldn’t even sneak cigarettes to my sick grandma without this creepy nurse popping her nose in to confiscate them.”

“Why’re you -- *Dude.* Your grandma probably has bio-nanotechnology she never would’ve *seen* without Vishkar. You guys are spoiled. People you know have limbs because of them. People you literally actually know would be dead.”

Then Hanzo grunts, “That is how they make themselves indispensable.”

The smaller girl sitting right next to him actually jumps -- she believed he was asleep, or else never even noticed he was there. Now she’s leaning forward to examine him along with everyone else.

Hanzo yawns wide, peering at them from under puffy lids. “It is their entire corporate goal to re-make the world through necessary support. That is why their logo is a diamond shape over an open V.”

Two of the students look at each other with a clear unspoken message: *this guy’s crazy.* Or, more accurate: *this guy’s stoned.*

The boy called Sai seems the least bothered. “Isn’t that, like, supposed to represent their hard-light projectors?”

“It is an open palm holding a diamond. Not offering, not creating. *Holding.”* Hanzo gathers his coat further around himself, getting more comfortable in his seat. His hand plucks an invisible string in the air. “Dangling it above you. Carrot on a stick.”

“Yeah, man!” One girl leans forward, the one called Anika. She has three piercings: one in her brow, one in her nostril, and one through her bottom lip. “What’d I say, Nick? That’s why they can do whatever they want. Did you guys even read those LumeriCo e-mails? That’s some shady shit.”

“Yes, they’re shady as fuck,” says the boy named Nick, rolling his eyes, “But we’re still getting all these great breakthroughs now! Did you see the filtration system they put up in Dharavi last month? Like, how many times do I have to say it -- lots of people would be *dead* if it wasn’t for Vishkar. Things are *generally* better. Sai, back me up.”

“That is how you obtain power,” Hanzo drawls, unaffected. “Vishkar has been following this strategy since their corporatization.”

Dev raises his brow. “You an expert, guy?”

Hanzo gives the boy a tired look. He glances back at the window, but there is still nothing interesting out there, especially through the dark.

“I have been following their corporation for years. It was my business to know.”

Nick looks him up and down. “You’re a… businessman?”

Hanzo almost bares his teeth. “Obviously not."

Another girl, the one named Pari, leans in to peer at Hanzo. “My cousin’s friend’s aunt said that Vishkar is shooting for a presence in Oasis. Is that true?”

“How would I know?” Hanzo rolls one shoulder to stretch it. “But it makes sense. They are already branching into B2B technology and consumer enhancements. I saw their products in an expensive bar in Kolkata, some local promotion. They are catering to the country’s highest earners, hoping to make the leap from building homes for emigrants to skyscrapers for the world’s wealthiest. Whole, exclusive cities.”

“Yeah, the bar part makes sense,” says Nick, staring at Hanzo’s gourd, “But Vishkar’s all about city contracts for development in impoverished areas, everybody knows that.”

Hanzo scoffs. "You are, what? A tech major? You admire their innovations but have not considered their motives. Why do you think they are after the most prime real estate in the world, instead of trying to ensure that not one soul in their own country goes without a safe and clean place to live?"

Nick sucks in air, incensed. "Dude, you have to make money to stay in business. And you're not even *from* here. You don't know what you're talking about."

"You and your generation are easily seduced by shine, and Vishkar knows it. That is why they are using a beautiful genius to further glamorize their brand. It is one of the oldest tricks in the book."

"What did I tell you?" Anika throws up her hands. "That's it -- I'm totally joining that coalition. You guys should, too. The next time they come to the campus, we should protest."

"Yeah," says Sai, "I think I might, too."

"Oh, come on," Nick shakes his head from Anika to Hanzo, "You guys are pessimists. To the *extreme."*

"Yes. Their commercials are very optimistic," Hanzo yawns. "If I were you, perhaps I would believe as you do. And they have undoubtedly left a bright past. But I do not see a bright future." He crosses his arms and leans into the window corner again, closing his eyes. "I see another type of gangster. Cool, slick. Promising the impossible."

"Yeah -- just like Overwatch!"

Hanzo opens his eyes on Anika. She is leaning even further forward, gesturing all over the place. "Bunch of idealists get together to solve a problem, save a lot of lives, right? Then they get way too big, way too fast, and inevitably become corrupt. As bad as what they once fought against. Vishkar is less sinister, though -- they definitely just want money. Overwatch wanted power."

Hanzo frowns at the window. The midnight world marches on and he has no more comments to make. At least, none he can voice.

"If you all are going to keep talking," he grunts, rising slowly, "I will take myself elsewhere."

"Yeah, sorry," Anika says, offhandedly. "Good luck."

He's about to take down his bow case when he sees another new face.

Someone is looking in through the glass in the door: male, mid-thirties. East-Asian. He's peering at Hanzo with special concentration, but when their eyes meet, he slowly looks away. He lingers as if he's just wandering around, then disappears. Cool as the cat that just fell off the cabinet.

The students watch Hanzo push back his hair as dread approaches his face.

"What's up?" asks Sai.

He looks at the window. Locked from the outside. He could get it open or break it, easy. Then he could --

No. That is what *shinobi* would do. They would be expecting that. Probably more of them waiting up top. Probably why they let their operative peek his face in the door.

To *herd* him.

Nick speaks up, “Dude? You… listen, do you need a glass of water or something? They serve coffee here, too...”

Hanzo whirls around so suddenly that Pari jumps again. He looks to the door, but the man is still gone. Waiting somewhere down the corridor, likely.

Trapped. Trapped with five civilians, all under twenty years old.

Dev frowns at the door, then at Hanzo. “You see a ghost, guy?”

Hanzo looks at them all. He shouldn't bring them into this. He should leave through the window and take his chances with whatever waits above.

But since that is his first impulse, he knows he must do the opposite.

He swallows through a dry throat. “I am being pursued.”

“Huh?”

“I was followed here by assassins. I must lose them.”

“What? Man, you really are high.”

“Yes,” Hanzo pinches back shame, “I am. I am also… I cannot fight well at the moment. And there will be more than one of them, to cover my escape routes. I cannot protect all of you.”

"Dude, are you kidding --"

"Quiet! I am *not* lying."

The kids go silent. Hanzo’s entire voice had changed: from the snarling, grouchy drawl of a strange drunkard to the equally snarling, yet regal tone of someone who knows exactly what they’re talking about. He rolls up his sleeves, showing tattoos and battle scars. A few exchanged glances and he can tell: they all pretty much believe him.

And they’re terrified.

Anika's voice is much smaller than before. “So... what do we do?”

Hanzo looks out the window, trying to pull answers from the dark. His gut tells him these are subtle killers and will wait indefinitely for their perfect moment. Even if he walks out with his bow drawn, they will be somewhere they can watch him, waiting to flank or ambush.

Probably armed with short blades, silencers, *shuriken* -- something they can use to take him out quickly and silently. Something for small places. If he makes too much commotion, he'll alert the train guards, who will only add to the chaos. He'll have to consider something deceptive rather than stealthy. A disguise, or a --

"I know!"

Nick stands up and reaches into one of his duffel bags. He pulls out two bottles of liquor and stands right in front of the door, blocking the window.

"Anika, turn on your radio. We're gonna have a party."

"What? What will that do?"

"If we get really loud, we'll bother everyone else in the train. They'll all be looking at us when we leave in the morning. We'll all go out together and surround him, laughing and making noise. They won't be able to touch him!"

"Idiot, what if they just…" Anika waves her hand, unable to speak the rest.

Hanzo scratches his beard. "I do not think they would kill you all just to get me."

Dev throws up his hands. "Oh, cool. Super reassuring, guy."

"No -- we wrap our faces! They won't be able to tell which is which."

Anika hisses, "Again, won't matter if they *kill us all."*

"Guys, this is not okay," Pari warbles, "This is really not okay! I feel like I need to tweet this!"

"Just, guys -- trust me! I really think this could work."

Hanzo grunts, "No." He frowns at the door. "She is right. It is not worth the risk."

Nick lowers the bottles. The compartment falls into a slumped silence. The archer rubs the back of his neck, paces a couple steps. He feels strangely distant from the situation; detached, more clear-headed than he's been in weeks. Might be the training. Might be the expectant eyes all around. He can't remember the last time a group of people looked to him for answers.

He knows what they're about to say; he has to go out alone. And that is certainly his last resort. But he's not there yet.

"If I cannot go around or through, I must force them to move."

Hanzo looks down at his wrist. The dragons would come if he called. But they are indiscrete, and have been ravenous for weeks; they will devour more than he means them to. More than their share.

“Guys… this is really not okay…”

But how else will he force his enemy off a moving train?

He looks at the world rushing past outside. Then he turns back to the students.

“You must do exactly as I say.”

Vihaan rolls down a window and shares a cigarette with Riya in the staff quarters, though they’re not exactly sharing -- Riya is an omnic, and only wants his company. He leans far into the night, soaking up the first cool air he's experienced all day. If he’d gotten a job on the palace-on-wheels, the train that makes an eight-day loop from New Delhi to the surrounding tourist hotspots, he’d have 24/7 air-conditioning and free wi-fi. But he wasn’t that dedicated to providing perfect customer service. He just wants to travel.

He comes back inside before the wind can put out his cigarette. Riya passes him a cup of *chai* and he smiles, holds it up to his lips, but the service light goes on before he can take a drink. He looks at her, scratching his beard, but she is already shrugging. They both know whose turn it is.

He can’t argue -- she has a hard enough time with guests as it is. He just hopes it isn’t like last week, when he had to move a two-hundred-pound omnic that had short-circuited down two cars and into the maintenance bay all by himself. Or the week before that, when a man had passed out from heat stroke. He wasn’t trained for these types of things. Or, if he was, he doesn’t remember. Orientation was kind of a drag.

Vihaan puts his cap back on, adjusts it firmly over his skull, and slides open the door. He is careful when shutting it behind. He goes to the indicated car and sees the small orange blinker above the door of compartment 14 -- though he needs no signal. The noise of tipsy young people and pop music was obvious as soon as he stepped into the corridor.

As he approaches, someone next-door sticks their head out to accost him.

“Finally! Are you going to do something about this? We cannot sleep in here!”

“I will take care of it, ma’am." He hooks a thumb on his belt, where his taser sits: his sole mark of authority. He means for it to look as if he has everything under control, but realizes too-late that it probably comes off as threatening.

"Please go... back inside?”

They withdraws immediately. Vihaan sighs, straightens his shoulders. He knocks twice on compartment 14 before sliding the door open.

Five people surround a prone young woman on the floor: four of similar age (likely fellow students) and one raggedy older man (who looks like he’d rather be anywhere else). The

fallen girl is on her back, hand limp over her chest, red-faced and puffing.

“She just fell over!” Another girl, smaller, gestures frantically. “She said the room was spinning, and I was like, ‘oh no,’ and then she just... fell over!”

Great -- another heat stroke, Vihaan thinks. *Although, it's really not that hot tonight...*

The girl on the floor convulses slightly. Vihaan removes his jacket, preparing to put it under her head. The door slides shut without his hand to keep it open. “I will send for aid. Have you all been drinking? You know that makes it worse, right?” He touches the girl’s forehead, but frowns. “I don’t think this is heat stroke. She doesn’t seem --”

Then a sudden blow hits the back of his head and he falls.

Hanzo emerges from the compartment ten minutes later in the train staff uniform. He keeps his hair tucked into the cap and the brim low over his eyes, but it’s hardly necessary; the compartment is very dark, and what lights do exist stay low enough for the passengers to sleep. Lucky for him -- the buttoned shirt just barely closes across his chest.

From within the compartment, Nick loudly calls: "Thank you, sir! She would've died if not for you!"

"Nick, shut up -- thanks, man," supplies Anika, "We promise we'll keep the noise down."

Hanzo nods, slips the door shut and heads straight for the front of the train.

When he passes between cars, in the rushing wind spaced between, he doesn’t risk looking up but stretches his sixth sense as far as it will go. Sometimes the dragons aid him in unforeseen ways, as if working electrical currents to show him where enemies may be hiding, but they offer no such help now. He can’t sense anyone.

Then, with a feeling akin to sudden nausea, Hanzo wonders if they would've answered his call at all. They’ve never disobeyed him before, but there are historical accounts of such incidents. They almost always end in the death of the Shimada in question, who is then posthumously deemed unworthy. The clan elders already decided that Hanzo is worthy of death; it would not be a stretch to imagine the dragons doing the same.

But he pushes the thought aside to focus on his task. He enters the service car, where there’s an omnic by the window, but she looks too late -- he is already through, and she does nothing to stop him. He was lucky the first staff member who answered their bell was human and roughly the same size. Hanzo had noticed both the man and the omnic when they’d started their shift, and he’d have had a much rougher time knocking out the 'bot without killing it. Not to mention the impossibility of donning her uniform.

When he gets to the front, the engineer swivels to meet him. He's armed. Hanzo ducks in the dark, rushes forward, and seizes the man's gun before he can get a shot off. Then he hooks

him to the ground, presses the pistol to his temple, clamps a hand over his mouth, and presses the pistol to his temple.

“This is what you are going to do.”

The students wait in the compartment. Nick’s knee twitches up and down repeatedly. Anika, now upright and no longer red-faced, stares out the dark window. They all keep quiet, though the radio pipes on, untouched for the past few hours. A figure lay still in Hanzo’s former corner. It's wearing his clothes, covered in his coat, with only a little beard and wild black hair showing through.

“What’s taking him so long?” Nick mutters.

“Shh! We have to stop near the trees. You see any trees?”

"I know, but... it's taking so long."

Nick’s knee keeps jumping. Anika checks on the unconscious man once or twice. Sai plays games on his phone. Pari furiously knits. Dev keeps checking out the compartment door’s window while simultaneously trying not to move.

Then a voice comes over the intercom. Anika turns down the radio.

“Attention, passengers. There has been an omnic threat on the station three kilometers ahead. This train will stop immediately until further instructions. Please prepare to evacuate so emergency services can search the cars. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The message repeats in Hindi. The students look at each other for a second before scrambling to gather their things. Anika pulls out a red *sari* from her luggage and wraps it around the large leather case stuck in the corner, tying it low on her back and throwing the complimentary blanket over her shoulders. Then she musses her hair and tries to look drunk. The others do the same.

Twenty minutes later, they’re all standing in the pre-dawn grass along with all the other passengers. They make sure to stand with their backs to the tree-line, as close as possible, which doesn’t prove to be difficult -- they’re practically pushed there by a dense crowd of very worried people. Nick loudly muses that it could be the Untouchables, who claimed responsibility for the bomb that went off in that New Delhi square a month ago, until Sai elbows him in the side and hisses about poor taste. Pari is on her phone, talking to her girlfriend. Dev looks around with his arms crossed, silent and cranky.

Anika looks around while trying not to appear so. Her hands are loosely folded over her stomach, just below the tied ends of her sari. She watches two train conductors walk around, counting heads, moving as a loose yet cooperative pair down the line. As they pass by, she searches their faces, and sags when they don't stop.

Then she feels the weight of the case on her back lift. The ends of her *sari* have been untied without her sensing it. She doesn't move, nor glance over her shoulder, but lowers her gaze and mutters under her breath:

"Good luck."

Hanzo doesn't put the case on his back or even remove the *sari* until he's well into the wilderness. He hopes the train attendant he knocked out gets found by the rest of the staff before the assassin. The chances a killer would attack before confirming the identity of his target are slim at best. No money if you don't get the right man.

But he still put a civilian at risk. Those kids took a risk as well, even if they were trying to save their own skins. There's a chance they'll be cornered later, interrogated on Hanzo's whereabouts. A small chance, infinitesimal. But a chance.

He goes for his gourd just as the muscle ache returns, his legs as heavy as iron trunks. He can't risk associating with others anymore, he decides -- not even for a simple chat. He must pass through this journey as swiftly and nondescript as the scenery past a moving freight. He has to take a rougher road to Mumbai so he can disappear in the city. Maybe find a cheap 24-hour clinic that won't ask him his name so he can actually figure out what's ailing him.

He could pretend to be mute, but that might arise even more attention; someone would leap to take care of him.

Just laconic, then. A drunkard and a drug-addict lost to his own world. Hidden by others' unwillingness to notice him. Someone Old Hanzo would've never deigned to look at twice. Completely and truly nameless.

He removes the *sari* , lays it over a tree branch, and continues with the case strapped to his back. He'd left Anika with some money, but it is a very beautiful dress. Red with gold embroidery and fine cream drape. Something for a Christmas party.

By the time the sun sets, he's the drunkest he's ever been. Incomparable even to the night of his father's death, after he'd returned from the *matsugo-no-mizu* with Genji. Tomorrow, he would arrange for the funeral. Tonight, he goes to the bar with the brothers to toast the fallen Shimada leader. But he can't get his father's voice out of his head. All night, he holds

imagined conversations, re-hashing old arguments and trying different combinations of words he will never get the chance to say. He feels morbid until he realizes that he's been doing that with his mother's voice for years.

Then he realizes that he isn't really hearing either of them, but acting out their voices himself. Playing at interviews because these made-up conversations with his parents, his ancestors -- these were all he would ever have. Amongst the living, he is alone. And he embodied that thought until he turned as brittle as his long-departed counsel.

Now he feels the same, holding his phone tightly in both hands, crouched at the very last car of the midnight express. The screen is black. His jaw aches from clenching. How can he explain any of this to Genji, who will never understand? And who else could he possibly call?

This time, before he can do something he'll regret, Hanzo opens the window and tosses the phone into darkness.

Then he sleeps. He dreams of the *ishi-dōrō* again. But this time, he doesn't head for the next lantern. He stands and stares at the darkness until he jerks awake from the sudden, swooping sensation of falling backwards.

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The Thar desert is much larger than it used to be. Battles and soil degradation during the Crisis left literal scorched earth that stayed arid and joined the dunes. Though plants and animals found their way back inside, no humans were around to bother. And no one bothers to cross it unless they have to -- or if they're trying to avoid detection.

The only transport making the trip these days is a first-generation hover-bus: two stories, twenty-three hoverpads and a bullet-proof hull. The first level is full of people sitting in colorful clumps, almost entirely shoulder-to-shoulder: families and couples, loners and children. Old men gamble in one corner, young foreigners rinse clothes in another. The penniless and the spendthrift piled into a metal ant, hot-footing across an alien vista. Their various smells combined with the tar-like earthiness of late-century engineering makes for a pungent soup, sticks in Hanzo's nostrils like wet smoke. The slatted windows make blades of golden light across the gathering, catching particles of sand and dust. These cloudy wisps leak through the top slats and drift over their heads before settling out of sight, fading and

rebirthing like collective fears and wishes. Hanzo is situated in a corner with an ancient television screen on the wall at his right, and it's there that he sees Mei.

Most of the transports nowadays have some form of broadcast. Sometimes it’s entertainment: morning shows, sporting events, the latest popular serial. More often it’s national news channels, since they're 24/7 and twice as addicting. The networks know the world is on edge and use it to their highest advantage. Hanzo usually ignores them, as the news carries as little interest for him as everything else nowadays, but it's difficult to avoid. And seeing Mei is enough to make him drop his jaw and glue his eyes to the screen like any other hooked viewer.

She's swaddled in arctic gear on a bright day in the wintry south pole. She's talking to Atlas News. She’s standing in front of the once-defunct Ecopoint at Antarctica -- Overwatch’s domain. He can still see their flags whipping high in the icy wind, worn to rags. He can just make out her delicate voice over the rattle of the transport and the drone of conversation.

“-- and Captain Opara’s monitors tracked the anomaly for all those years. The data is comprehensive. I have been running analysis since spring, but there is much more than I initially thought. Which is why I’ve gathered this team from the Chinese Institute to --”

“What conclusions have you drawn from this data?”

“Well… nothing yet.” She puffs a steam-sigh out of her pink cheeks. “We came to the Ecopoint because the facilities here are the best for this type of testing, but there is still a lot of work to do. I'm lucky to have such a good team!"

“So you can’t tell us anything? What do you think it could mean?”

Hanzo sees her dark eyes dart to the side and then back to the reporter beside the camera. She is withholding information.

“The atmospheric fluctuations are a reason to research this matter further. That's all it is right now -- a reason to look.”

“No personal theories, then? Forgive me, but you said you've been examining this data since spring.”

Hanzo's lip curls as a wave of protectiveness sweeps through him.

“Science does not hold to a time-table, and theories are not… personal.” Mei holds up a single gloved finger, “I am the only one left from this expedition. It is my responsibility to make sure this data saves lives.” She lowers her hand, looking more worried than combative, but more determined than worried. She even manages a smile, though it's hard to make out with Hanzo's poor vision. “ *That* is personal.”

The reporter takes over and the footage cuts to a panel of pundits, eager to relay their analysis. Hanzo leans forward, switches off the TV and looks at his shadowy reflection in the black glass. His hair is down and starting to look matted. Two large gray streaks on the sides like accidents. His beard is starting to form into one coherent wisp, the ends split and dry, one

long gray streak down the center. He looks more like his father than ever. His grandfather, even.

He rubs his dry eyes, now permanently bloodshot, though he does nothing to correct it. His reflection is too blurry to examine the state of his very-tanned skin, but he can't tell if that's due to the screen's decay or his own degrading vision. He couldn't be more different from the cheery, determined scientist, starting all over with a new team at the site of her life's greatest tragedy. But what of Overwatch?

There's no reason to worry, he tells himself. Mei seems fine. The reporter was pushy because it's Overwatch-related -- it's controversy. She's taking a risk just showing her face. But if she's gotten support from the Chinese Institute, after Winston told them to lay low, it must be for a good reason. And if her team is researching some anomaly they tracked during the Ecopoint's accidental hibernation, it must be, as she said, worth looking into.

None of it was ever my concern to begin with. The amber-glass bottle empties the dropper three times down his throat. The clinic who re-filled his prescription couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. Something only a specialist could figure out, they said. No matter. Mumbai will have the best doctors, and he'll be there soon enough.

He does wonder what anomaly Mei was talking about. He can't recall her ever mentioning something like that on Gibraltar. He always took her preoccupied affect as the mark of someone uprooted, lifted from the environment that bore her like a specimen shipped across the earth and cast, alone, into an unfamiliar land. Someone outside of time. Not unlike himself -- at least in that small regard.

When the medicine takes hold, he experiences his own version of cryostasis: like a weighted blanket is being draped over his entire body. Nothing he ever 'sampled' in his youth hit him quite like this. It used to be all about going faster, working longer. Taking just enough to outpace the competition, never more than was manageable. Now he feels like he can't go slow enough, and he always takes enough to render self-control negligible. He finally understands the experience behind the term 'floored;' the floor seems like a good a place to be as anywhere right now.

Still, the reaction feels weaker than it did a few days ago, so he takes a couple more drops. Building a tolerance is to be expected. He's just shy of the turning point, when it will hurt more to keep taking the medicine than it will be to deal with the disease. The moment to stop will make itself clear when it comes. He's a practiced alcoholic. He knows what he's doing.

Hanzo blinks at the bars of horizontal light and the patches of eyes, mouths, bodies in-between. These people are taking a risk, traveling for this long over open desert. Suspended between civilization and whatever the Crisis left over. He wonders why they don't look more anxious. *But then* , he thinks, yawning wide, *Limbo's only as bad as the company you keep.*

At least, in the deep sleep provided by the amber-glass bottle, he doesn't have to spend time with himself.

A hunting trip with his father through the Peruvian Amazon. Forest not just wide, but dense. Every square inch packed with life both glorious and deadly. Less dense is the mist that pours between boughs yet conceals even the eastern Andes. Somewhere close but blocked by green, the Amazon river churns, ready to flood mere days from now.

It's a far cry from the floating hotel oasis where they left Genji. The youngest is probably still sipping cocktails at the poolside cabana with the brothers right now, flirting with guests, staff -- casually creating fires that someone else will have to put out.

Hanzo isn't jealous. He'd rather be here, on the hunt. There's always time to drink later.

He hardly sees his father when it's not connected to business and this trip is no exception. At the first trail marker, they meet up with Yamaguchi-sama and his saiko-komon *, a younger man named Fukuda. Hanzo notices the clipped tip of the advisor's pinky finger the second they meet. The area is still a little red; the punishment must have been recent. They use the same knives for the ritual that they've used for hundreds of years. It is never an easy cut. Nor should it be.*

After bowing to Yamaguchi, Hanzo nods his head to Fukuda and never looks at him again.

"Have you done the fishing tour yet?" Yamaguchi is smoking a cigar, holding his rifle tucked under his arm like one would a beach towel. "You should take your boys. Eiji loved it."

Shimada Sojiro is trimmer, meaner, but just as casual. About the same height but riddled with power. The only feature of Hanzo he doesn't share are his son's dramatic three-point eyebrows -- his own are thick blocks over pale-gray eyes. "My second-born went yesterday. He was very pleased to have caught a piranha."

"Ha!" Yamaguchi gestures to Hanzo. "And you, Hanzo?"

"I was busy looking over the details of your proposal."

Yamaguchi looks at Sojiro, but the father is looking elsewhere, scanning the trees for boar. This is a hunt, after all.

So Yamaguchi looks back at Hanzo. "And?"

"You are asking for too much."

The old oyabun *jerks his head back in surprise, barks a laugh. "Not one to mince words, is he?"*

"My eldest is blunt at times," Sojiro says, with an air that lets only Hanzo know that he is being chided. "But I'm afraid I share his concerns."

"Come on, Sanjuro-san. We've been over this. Four shipments across two years for one hundred a piece? That's a bargain."

“Well, we don’t have to discuss it now.” Sojiro claps Yamaguchi’s shoulder and lifts his rifle. “Did I show you this piece yet? Off-market prototype. American."

“Ahh, it’s beautiful. Your El Paso contact?”

“Colorado, actually.”

Yamaguchi grunts in lieu of stating his admiration. “The drum magazine seems excessive. And it’s a bit short.”

“It’s not for hunting.” Sojiro holds the weapon up to what little light pierces the canopy. “It’s based off a Swedish design, easy to repair and modify. The drum removes the need to constantly reload -- good for driving and shooting.”

“Ah.”

“The silencers are remarkably effective as well. A multi-use product in every sense.”

Hanzo sees Yamaguchi glance at Fukuda for some silent exchange. He smiles to himself at a private joke -- ‘a right-hand man without a full right hand.'

Yamaguchi grins at Sojiro. “Alright, my friend. How much do you want for them?”

“I’ll save you a shipment. I'm afraid there’ll be nothing until Christmas. I’ve already made a deal for the first three quarters.”

“With who?”

“A Brazilian group. The unrest there has been mounting for months. The police are ineffectual. The need for fast and versatile weapons is growing.”

“Well, I… Shimada-sama, that is far from home.”

“It is a large world, my friend, and only getting larger. We must diversify. Oh, watch out for those ants,” Sojiro side-steps on the path. “Their sting is like a bullet, I’ve been told.”

“God, why did I agree to come to a place like this,” Yamaguchi mutters, walking around the line of ants. “Do you think it’s worth it? To upset the balance without knowing the outcome? What happens in Brazil will have unseen repercussions for all of us. It could get out of hand.”

Sojiro looks at Yamaguchi at the same time as Hanzo. While Yamaguchi only glances at the eldest son, he hardly sees the boy’s real face -- with those brows, and those cheeks, the old oyabun *can only see Mayumi.*

Yamaguchi swivels his head as a faraway growl permeates the constant chorus of insects, birds and amphibians. Probably a cayman, or a jaguar. Probably.

“When the river floods here, only villages built on stilts remain. We’re just selling the stilts." Sojiro shoulders his rifle and presses on. "And nothing gets out of hand,” he smirks down at

Hanzo, as if sharing an inside-joke. “It gets handled.”

Hanzo wakes up on a bench beside train tracks. Starlight glows as it only can far from city glares. He looks at the station marker but finds it unfamiliar -- he can’t even tell if he’s out of the desert.

He looks down at his hands and sees scraped knuckles; he’s hit someone, or something. Pain, like branches of lightning, shoots up his flank.

It comes back to him in patches: a card game, an ornery drunk. A brief fist-fight. Getting thrown off the transport. Sitting on this bench and emptying his gourd. Nightfall and the sound of locusts.

No; crickets, or the like. Lucky he wasn’t robbed or killed, but he's always had a kind of survival auto-pilot when intoxicated. Must be the training. Or the years of experience. It cannot be luck -- he's never had any that he didn't make for himself.

He remembers that trip with his father very well. He thought of it the first time he met Lúcio, and every time he saw the boy's face after.

He tries to fish out his phone to look at the photos again, but stops when he remembers.

The gourd is empty, so he takes more of the medicine instead. Tilts the bottle, ignoring the dropper, to make up for the lack of booze. There’s no question of his addiction anymore. There’s also no question of his ability to care. A real stroke of luck -- the drug is both an antidote to pain and shame alike.

When the darkness hits this time, it's less like a weighted blanket and more like a brick wall.

His apartment in Rippongi is a world away from the castle in Hanamura. Not in distance, certainly, but in style -- high steel beams, soft white lines. Long planes of uninterrupted glass and a dazzling urban panorama. Two cases beside the walk-in closet: one for weapons, one for suits. An immaculate ceramic sake *set atop a low wooden table. A* muk yan jong *with its own corner, for his recent foray into Southern Chinese styles. A long gray cat who comes and goes as it pleases, staying whenever it's quiet.*

But there's chaos coming up the hallway. Hanzo and Takuya stumble inside, jackets under their arms, ties loose. Katana *knocking into each other in the doorway, causing cackling laughter from Takuya and low, resonant* heheheh's *from Hanzo.*

"Damn, every time," Takuya chuckles, stroking back his dyed blonde hair.

"Every time what?"

"Every time I come in here, I'm in awe. I can see the whole city."

Hanzo takes off his tie, then takes off Takuya's from behind. He nuzzles the back of his neck, the soft black hair and sun-touched skin. "Every time you come here, I only want to see you."

"Corny." Takuya grins at the floor. "Oh, there's a cat."

"Umeko."

"Hello, Umeko."

"Good-bye, Umeko," Hanzo mutters, as the cat zips out the door. He snaps it shut behind her with his foot.

"Hey!" Takuya turns around, presses close again. "I like cats."

"I don't want her to see," Hanzo slips open Takuya's shirt buttons like he's done it a million times, "What I'm about to do to you."

"Oh yeah?" Takuya shoves Hanzo back, finishes peeling off his shirt himself. He's smaller than Hanzo, but wiry with muscle. There's two long tigers climbing down his biceps and over his pectorals, their tails winding all the way around his shoulders with startling red chrysanthemums. He sat for weeks for that tattoo. He's very proud of it. So is Hanzo. "What's that?"

The Shimada heir grins closed-mouth, looking to Takuya's eyes like a summoned demon. He leans slowly forward, kisses twice up his neck, then starts whispering against the soft shell of his ear while herding him backwards.

Takuya's brown eyes widen to black. His brows draw together, he whimpers. Hanzo keeps talking as he slips the other man's belt from his trousers, places his katana *carefully on the table as they pass, still whispering. He slips the belt around Takuya's throat and gently tugs it through its buckle, tightening. Emphasizing his words. Takuya's knees start to buckle. Luckily, they're already close to the bed.*

Takuya sits on the low futon. Hanzo lords over. The smaller man strokes up his legs, thumbs the V of his hips, lets his ravenous desire known through heat and breath. Hanzo tugs on the belt to draw him as close as possible. They can never be close enough.

Hanzo smirks. "How does that sound?"

Takuya is red and speechless. Hanzo couldn't be more pleased.

But just as he's about to crawl on top, the belt feels immeasurably heavy in his hand. He looks down and turns the buckle towards the city lights.

B-A-M-F.

When Hanzo wakes this time, he can tell where he is. Some station in the middle of nowhere, three miles from his original destination; close enough. He can feel sloshing liquid inside his gourd and hear the wind through the trees, rattling the station marker against which he leans. The midday sun woke him up. He's feverish, damp with sweat.

He drinks to stop the headache.

He's lucky to be out in the wilderness again. Outside the villages, far from people, the faint linger of spice mingles with local flora and warm green wind. If he focuses, he can smell the after-burn of trains that still run on diesel. Cow peat, sandalwood oil. Something like vanilla smoke. Something like a kiss he should've given when he'd had the chance.

It's painful, but it doesn't last long. Before he can even decide to suppress any memories, the medicine takes him again, and he doesn't care anymore. He didn't even realize he was drinking it.

White concrete and blackened wood. Flat glass facades next to wobbly tiled roofs. Old telephone wires and clean hologram street-signs. A chainlink fence casts scaley shadows on the pavement in late afternoon, making him feel as if he is walking on a dragon's back. Why would he ever want to be anywhere other than Tokyo?

The day is cool after many months of dire heat and the relief is nigh-euphoric. With such extreme summers and winters, any place in-between is worth savoring. The spring has its own special appreciations, with sakura viewings and fairs, including Sanja Matsuri *-- the crowded, intense festival with heavy palanquins and displays of team strength, in which he and Genji often take part. The fall is equally celebrated -- this year, there's even a demonstration of* abusame *, the art of horseback archery, which Hanzo plans to participate in next Monday. Even now, he can hear* taiko *drums several streets away, but he has no plans to join the neighborhood Halloween party. He'll show up Saturday, when the major news publications will be present.*

The dragons like the drums. He can feel them under his skin, always more powerful when he's about to make a big decision. They respond to his will, which must also be carefully contained and judiciously executed. He doesn't have the luxury of stretching his legs -- his will and the dragons must both be governed. These are the lessons he remembers from his grandfather's writings, or rather, his mother's telling of said writings. He never did get to read the words himself. They're encased in clay somewhere, still and silent. Like his mother, going on three years now.

He passes a shop selling Halloween costumes and sees an oni *mask in the window. It's clever and well-made -- matte red with gleaming black over a flawless white face, golden fangs and*

a silk ribbon beside. He's drawn to it, covets it. But he's flanked by two guards and cannot waste time. Even if the guards weren't there, he wouldn't break stride. Even if living eyes aren't watching him, those a thousand-years dead always will.

When he passes the gates of Shimada castle, he takes the long way up the gravel path. The trees are glorious shades of auburn and mahogany-red, the vines a dark and luscious green. The flat stepping stones are damp with late rain and musky in smell. There's something pungent about the atmosphere of autumnal decay -- equal parts alluring and unpleasant.

The first cool breezes always makes him feel ambitious, alert. Like when he's about to start class or enter the dojo. A chance to show off. The opportunity to excel. To utilize the skills he's dedicated himself to since he was crawling across those same flat stones.

As he leaves the shrine and approaches the main castle, he's greeted by the sumptuous odor of roasting pork, smokey and mouth-watering. He also detects the faintest whiff of… sugar cookies? Probably Genji's request. There are no other *children here.*

Speak of the devil. "Brother! Do you like my costume?"

Hanzo stops and stares. He looks Genji up from top to bottom, then back again. Then he looks at the floor, where there's a trail of glitter across the polished hardwood. That stuff is, without a doubt, going to be on his suit tomorrow morning.

He deliberately walks around his little brother's outstretched arms. "What are you supposed to be?"

Genji follows him into the main house. "I don't really know, actually. Last year I just wore a hoodie and a mask, so Momo said I had to try something more elaborate. She put this together after we went shopping in Shibuya. Looks cool, right?"

"You look like an undead fairy prostitute."

Genji points to his own wide grin. "Do fairies or undead have glow-in-the-dark fangs?"

"You look like a psychotic angel fucked a shini-gami *."*

He takes out the fangs to speak better. "That's closer, I think."

Hanzo eyes him again. "And expensive."

Genji hooks an arm over his elder brother's shoulders and brays in a fake British accent: "'Tis only once a year, sir!"

Hanzo snorts. After a second, he bites the inside of his cheek.

Genji grins at his profile, loosens his arm to pat Hanzo's back. "Come on, I know you've got at least one more in you."

"You look like a vampire that feeds exclusively on Martian hookers."

Genji throws his head back and laughs, that high and fast vibration, like a bird's raucous twittering. "There it is!" Hanzo snickers along.

As they enter a long hallway banked by paper doors, the youngest Shimada drawls, "Are you gonna come with me or not? It's only half an hour away."

Hanzo's tone grows deeper, fouler. "No. *Are* you *going to --" Then he cuts himself off.*

Genji still follows, wary. "Going to what?"

A tense silence falls as easy as night's shadow, and just as predictably. Hanzo doesn't want to ask Genji to help with what his father has tasked to him. Not because he doesn't want the help, but because he doesn't want to hear Genji's refusal. He knows Genji will lie, make up some excuse, or just outright refuse and then abscond to Harajuku or wherever the party is at these days. He's not going to fight for Genji's attention any longer. It's beneath him.

But he still can't curb the low hiss of his voice: "nothing."

Genji puts up his hands as if Hanzo has already lost his temper. It's a cowardly preliminary technique -- like how when they were young, and he used to cry before Hanzo had even hit him, just to get Hanzo in trouble. Little brat.

"Whatever. I'm leaving. You have my cell if you need me."

Which means less than nothing. "Fine."

Genji stops and turns for the opposite way. Hanzo walks on until a second voice makes him stop.

"Y'sure about that, partner?"

The eldest slowly turns.

Cassidy is standing between Hanzo and Genji. Genji, who has paused halfway out to answer a text, doesn't seem to notice. Together they make a row of three in the narrow hall, paper walls on either side glowing with the dim amber-light of candles beyond. The gunslinger is an exaggeration of his usual look: the red serape covers his entire upper half, his long legs are even longer, the toes of his boots seem sharper. The ragged brim of his hat covers his entire face. Like a spirit; or a demon.

Hanzo stares without surprise, without acknowledgment of these exaggerations. He has passed a city all in blue, a palace surrounded by lakes, a temple covered in monkeys -- he greeted all with the same lack of expression, the same robotic acceptance. A man knowing he looks at a dream and accepting it as such. Nothing separates this reality from the other, with

all its token absurdities. Why shouldn't the gunslinger be here? He steals into everywhere else.

At least in a dream, Hanzo can see clearly; when Cassidy lifts his head, his face is as vivid as ever. Nothing altered. Nothing lost. He is exactly as Hanzo remembers him: crows' feet, broken nose, dark skin. Honest smile. Open.

Hanzo hates himself for ever looking so closely.

But he still takes a step back. "I have work to do."

"It's Halloween. Ain't that a good time to let loose?"

"For children, yes."

"Maybe so. But he's right. S'only once a year."

Hanzo looks down the hall, where the shrine balcony waits. It's where he likes to sit and think. Sometimes he'll sit there for hours, alone, looking out at Hanamura or up at Fuji-san, reaching around and beyond to analyze circumstances far in advance. He would punish those who interrupted him, but when he finished, he usually had some strategy that proved to be near-prophetic. All day, every day, his mind turns to the success of the clan. There's never time to waste. Dead eyes are always watching.

He turns back to address Cassidy, but looks at Genji. "I'm busy."

The cowboy frowns. That temper again. "He's your brother."

Hanzo's frown deepens. "I'll take him to Kyoto next week."

"That's next week." Cassidy steps so that his right foot points to Hanzo while his left points to Genji. He is leaning away. "This is today."

Hanzo makes a fist. "I can't."

In that final, pleading word the gunslinger had flung at his feet in that cave, in the exact tone and cadence, in Hanzo's very flesh: "Baby…"

Hanzo snarls, "I can't."

Then the gunslinger shrugs the way that he shrug, smiles that smile of his, tips his hat and turns towards Genji. Easy come, easy go. Smoke drifts up from the floor, rounds both their retreating shoulders. They walk away, down the hall, twisting and darkening before blackening altogether like a dead leaf caught fire; but Hanzo is the one who burns.

He opens his eyes with a shuddering groan. Someone sitting next to him, pressed to his shoulder, recoils. Then they settle back with a tired sigh. As if Hanzo were merely another part of the train that momentarily bumped under their restful head.

Wherever he is, he managed to get drunk again. There's two paper bags in his lap: one a fried snack made from lentils and boiled peanuts, one a half-empty bottle of some amber-hued liquor. Three old women sit to his right, smoking *charas* and chatting in a language Hanzo cannot understand. There's a large, bearded man to his left talking to a woman about the Himalayas and their unimaginable snowstorms. She is British, tells him that London expects a white Christmas this year -- another unusual phenomenon. The *charas* smoke gets everywhere, but no one says anything. Must not be any kids around. Hanzo has to guess, because he can't really see.

He lets his numb eyes shut and tries to stop listening. He doesn't want to hear about other peoples' problems -- he never did. He's got too much of his own to work out. Isn't that why he left in the first place? Where is the path he's supposed to be walking? How long must he wander in the dark?

There's no pain, but he drinks the medicine anyway. No one stops him. No one even sees him. He has achieved perfect anonymity and now, like an unforeseen bonus, he feels like he can finally do whatever he wants. And what he wants is to be totally obliterated.

He wonders if this is how Genji felt in his new body: detached, stupefied. Alone. Bloodied and broken, at the brink of death, and then -- what? Light? Pain? He still remembers his medical file, the one he broke into several times at Gibraltar. The Swiss doctor was thorough and Hanzo made sure to memorize every detail, perched there in the dark storage caverns like some earth-dwelling insect: riddled with wires and half-formed legs, half-blind and strapped to metal. Weeping over slashed cheeks. Trembling with his first agonizing steps, hearing a soft motor in lieu of his own lungs. He blacked out a sparrow and woke up a monster.

Hanzo chuckles to himself, tongues the tip of his dog tooth: *wonder if I'll wake up a sparrow.*

He finishes a full bottle of the medicine, leans back against the wall, and lets the amber-glass roll out of his limp palm. Hot tears roll down his cheeks, but he cannot feel them. He hasn't felt anything in a long time. Just before the darkness hits, he has the distinct experience that he really is waking up. As if the long-hanging veil has finally lifted. As if he's finally stopped pretending that he doesn't hate everything that he is.

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The clan’s crest does not yet exist; Shimada Yoriuji wears empty white spheres on his *montsuki.* His three scabbards, all glossy red, are a deadly trademark in certain circles, but nothing to the nobles with whom Yoriuji must now associate. He's been walking the shores of Nagasaki for hours, but he still can’t imagine what his weapons should represent that the color doesn’t already imply. That the steel hasn’t already proven.

The shogunate has granted them titles and land in Edo, the first ninja clan to be risen so high, but Yoriuji still feels a fool in all these fine clothes. His father was born in a hovel in the Iga mountains. Yoriuji learned to make his own arrows before he was strong enough to draw back a bow. He's killed samurai and politicians, traveled half the island and held dozens of deadly jobs, but never owned anything nicer than a tiny jade brooch, and that he bought for his wife. But she likes him in fine clothes, so he wears them. He’d do anything for her.

And he’d do anything for the children. They must be home by now, playing with their little friends. His wife tells him that the new neighbors don't approve of the orphans that file in and out night and noon, but they all keep their mouths shut. They all know about Yoriuji's skill, skill that he will soon teach to those children in his new dojo. Any child who can hold a sword will be welcome. Success is for the next generation; a well-made house that stands for thousands of years. But what does a man born in a forest know about how to keep a house, and what it should represent?

He scratches his graying temple as he looks across the western sea, at the newly opened world beyond. Then he looks over his shoulder, back at his own country, where war is brewing over land and loyalties. Both present a wealth of unknown challenges and he'll have to meet them when they come -- as will his sons. The world is changing so fast. None of them can afford any doubt. But Yoriuji has always had trouble quieting his mind, and now there are no clear steps at which to focus his tumultuous energy. His path is dark. The only solid thing he's ever been able to truly grasp in this life is the well-worn braid of his *katana* and the souls of many men.

At the shore below, the sun is leaking into the horizon. Yoriuji exhales slowly through his nostrils as he lowers himself to a cross-legged position, just like his master taught him; he must have faith that new seasons will bring new blessings. This transience should be honored.

His eyes shut. He smells the salted wind, feels the shifting sand beneath his legs. He hears the ocean’s breathing and tries to breathe along.

Then he hears something like echoing water in a cave. A single drop on a deep, still pool.

Yoriuji opens his eyes and looks around, but sees nothing to match the sound. He rubs his ear, dismissive. His imagination, surely -- though he never did have much of that.

Then it sounds again: one, two, a pause. Then a third. Then nothing.

Yoriuji furrows his tri-pointed brows. He looks over his shoulder at the rocky outcropping but sees only tall grass. He looks at the water but sees only waves.

Waves that are receding from the shore.

He doesn't stop to wonder. His grandfather told him what it means when the surf starts running backward. He rushes for the rocky outcropping as fast as he can, hand secure on his *katana* .

Then he hears it: the growling. A cavernous, unholy sound. Like an animal, yet larger than any animal he's ever heard of. His grandfather never mentioned anything like that.

Yoriuji turns. A wave is forming, rising higher and higher, blocking the setting sun. He knows he should be running, but awe holds him still. Have the gods chosen? Is he at the end of life? Does he truly hold no future purpose?

The growling grows louder, rising like the wind itself. The water has turned from light to dark, and now light again -- a blinding, cyan-blue current stretches up the middle of the wave. It moves like a giant snake.

Yoriuji’s jaw drops. The breath disappears from his lungs.

Phosphorescent scales present every color in the visible spectrum. Tendrils and fans of gold and bronze. A long and narrow snout and blindingly bright eyes. The growling lessens, then mounts again, and pierces nature's vibration with its own gong-like roar. It looks down and spreads its fans, its maw, its glass-bright claws. It's hungry. It's hunting.

But Yoriuji walks forward.

He knows that it’s wrong. He knows you should kneel before gods. But Shimada Yoriuji has never truly knelt before anything in his life --leave that show to the samurai. Real honor resides in ones' actions. This is a sign for the direction of his house, the path of his life. He'll follow this god into the water and know its power for his own.

But then the wave comes down. Pounding water crashes on his mortal bones, rushing, boiling, tossing him deeper and deeper. He gropes for his *tantō* and lodges it in a rock. He fights to hold on. He doesn’t pray -- he resists.

Then the sea spits him out. Yoriuji coughs, vomits saltwater. He struggles to rise. The wave, less high now, growls with cold vindictiveness. It starts to recede.

"Wait!" Yoriuji throws his arm, stumbles forward, then remembers and falls to his knees. He draws his *katana* , its glossy red scabbard singing with its release, and offers it up with both hands. But still he does not bow.

"You are lord of your realm." The gleam of the sun, now piercing over the crest of the shorter wave, catches the burnished edge of his perfect steel. "Give me your power and I will use it to make you lord of mine. Fight by my side, and I will see your dominion extend from that world into this. You will never know hunger again."

The wave falls, revealing only the god. It rears, fans and tendrils flaring, opening its jaws to reveal unholy blue fire. It screams, it descends, but Yoriuji keeps his eyes open.

It dives towards him. The rush of wind whips his fine clothes. His joints rattle, close to breaking. The whole world is close to breaking.

Then silence, cold, and fresh black ink on his left arm. Reaching down through his sword-arm. Reaching with an open mouth.

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Hanzo opens his eyes to blackness. He looks around, sees nothing, and starts to close them again. Then a faint droning noise catches his attention and he turns.

And he groans. The floating *ishi-dōrō* .

His heart sinks through the tar-like black. How long will he be subject to this limbo? Should he really end it now? Does he truly hold no future purpose?

His knees crumble with the onset of despair. At least, now he knows -- this lantern is no different from the next one. There is no end to this path. There is no end at all.

He blinks, ready to sleep. He smells linseed oil. He hears his mother's whisper.

Without trying to look at anything, his eyes naturally fall upon the moths. They dart circuitous, not minding the mechanical hum. For the first time since these dreams started, Hanzo hears their wings. Soft, ethereal. Not like locusts. He's never heard it before. He never knew it was there.

He doesn’t get up to walk to the next lantern. He doesn’t stand in the tar-like black. He just crosses his legs and watches the moths.

His mind drifts to the ancestor; the man who called the dragon from the sea. You can never truly tame a god. You become one yourself, and fight to remain so all your life. Like the story his father used to tell them about the prince with the crown of light.

Funny -- Genji said, in Gibraltar, that that story reminded him of Overwatch. He never did understand their father’s lessons.

The last thing Hanzo remembers is the warmth, the hum, and the massive presence of the dragons hovering over his shoulders.

I wanted this, Hanzo thinks. *I made this happen.*

He's sitting on the cold floor of a small tiled bathroom. Past the open door, he can see a motel bedroom. There's a tree outside the window with branches poking in. There's a split in his head that makes even blinking hurt. The droning holovid is the only light in the room, playing some ancient recording he recognizes only because he once knew a man named Cole Cassidy: *que sera sera... whatever will be, will be...*

He has no idea how he got here, or what time it is, but the newspaper laid out by the toilet tells him that he somehow made it to Mumbai.

He doesn't need to wonder why the newspapers are spread all over the floor. He can already smell the vomit.

Groaning like an animal, Hanzo begins the agonizing labor of getting onto his feet. The streetlamp outside hits the white tile with a morose blue glow. Storm Bow's case is on the bed outside. His clothes are next to it; he's just in boxer-briefs now. Everything seems to be in order.

Except that his knives are sitting on either edge of the sink. Both of them: the sharp one and the dull one. The sharper *tantō* is for killing only. The other is a back-up he uses for a variety of purposes. He is never without either, no matter the circumstances.

Why are they waiting for him on the sink?

Hanzo stares, stone-still, as he imagines picking one of them up. The visualization is instantly soothing. Weapons have always felt good in his hands, particularly blades. He remembers the weight of the *katana,* the sound of clashing blades. He remembers the sickening ease of cutting through.

Surely no one so naturally gifted at murder should be allowed to live. Certainly not in this new world that Genji and his ilk are trying to create.

Then, a foreign voice he cannot name: *what made you once believe that Genji wasn't allowed to live?*

He looks at his gnarled reflection and mutters to him: "duty."

That man is unrecognizable, and yet, Hanzo thinks again: *I did this* . He made the disguise, he drank into oblivion. It all came from him, and so, was no kind of change at all. Trying to change has made him more *himself* than ever before. He's chasing his own tail. Or eating it.

In one smooth motion, he lifts the dull blade and slices off the end of his beard.

He keeps cutting until he has a layer of short hair. Then he uses the hotel soap to make a lather and shaves with the sharper blade. The edge is beautiful in the light, appealingly sharp.

One wrong move and he'd see red.

He cuts until he's re-shaped a thicker version of his former goatee. He looks down at the slashes of black hair in the white sink, then up to his face. His calloused hand across his jaw feels good. The cutting feels good, the air on his face feels good. Like he's opened the window and let in a breeze -- as if winter has finally arrived. Like he's seeing a new piece of the earth, back when he was interested in the things that flew past his window.

And he hasn't felt good in a very long time.

So he keeps going. He pulls all his hair tight and holds the blade against the ends, just as he did one decade ago over a stream in the mountains beyond Hanamura. By the light of the moon, he'd cut the hair he'd been growing since childhood and began his ten-year exile.

But perhaps that would be too extreme.

So he bundles the hair on his crown into a topknot and cuts the hair on the sides instead. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he's aware that he's doing something irrevocable, possibly regrettable. But the air feels even better on his scalp than it does on his jaw. And, in his weakened state, the only good decision is the one that will make him feel better right now.

And if the ancestors disapprove of his haircut, he will gladly welcome their guidance. They've been too silent for too long. *If you want something, say something.*

Hanzo stands under cool water until the growl in his stomach makes him take up the motel phone and order food. He finds a 24/7 restaurant that delivers: *naan* , vindaloo curry, butter chicken, *samosas* , basmati rice and a whole carton of *masala chai* . He fills up an empty liquor bottle with water from the bathroom sink and forces himself to drink the entire amount. Then he throws up again, washes up again. He finds cleaner beneath the sink and scrubs until the smell goes away.

When the food arrives, he keeps his ravenous appetite in check with self-recrimination. He can't believe how selfish he's been. It was perverted, that curiosity for the pit. He certainly didn't need to go that far in his efforts to remain hidden. What did he expect to find at rock bottom? More infuriating dreams, more *kōans?* He's lucky to have made it out with only damaged pride. He's lucky he hasn't been punished.

At least , he thinks, blinking against the light of the holovid, *my vision is getting better.*

After he eats, he leaves the cartons on the floor and watches the news. He watches for hours. The locust swarm has passed north, where a sudden snowstorm wiped them out. In their wake, Vishkar cooling centers have become a national venture, despite worries of interference from the Untouchables. Hana "D.Va" Song will be hosting a live stream Christmas special. Lúcio is holding a concert the day before and will make a guest appearance on her show. Reports of break-ins surround a high-security compound in eastern

Egypt. More reports of the Australian criminals and their worldwide theft spree. Reports of Lena Oxton sighted in London, where forecasts predict the snow will continue until New Year. No word on the anachronistic gunslinger in Texas, but Los Muertos is vying for attention, vandalizing LumeriCo property with phosphorescent warnings.

His mind wanders in-between. Thoughts of the people he's met since he found out Genji was alive, and those before. Life feels increasingly divided into those two groups. He holds them up on the same level, like artifacts arranged to best catch the sun. Or one in each hand.

Then he feels an immense weight sink into his muscles. At first he worries that the ache has returned, but no -- he's just exhausted. So he sleeps, curled beneath the blankets like he's floating in the womb. The news spins endlessly onward.

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A lot has changed in Mumbai over the past decade alone, but remnants of the past are still well-protected. Victorian leftovers pose next to totally unique projects, like the lotus-shaped tower of refractive pale pink: the largest movie studio in the world. There's a silvery fin-shaped structure with a white paisley facade beside a temple thousands of years old. Gardens and trees aplenty have been worked into developments, as like many major cities of the world. A few twisting skyscrapers lined with wind turbines and self-sustaining greenery; all built by Vishkar. From the IT sector in the north to the commercial districts in the south, their influence comes in many forms: hard-light traffic signs, tourist kiosks, apartments. Designated sites for constantly changing restaurants or cafes, a different theme each month. With the ability to construct whole businesses in the blink of an eye, all they need do is follow the market research.

Christmas Eve is another opportunity for display. Vishkar has glowing fir trees with transforming decorations on every other corner. Hard-light snowflakes glide on the tips of traffic lights and street lamps alike. Between their decorations and the billions of multi-colored string-lights, Mumbai is brighter at night than at day. Uptown, holographic globes and shimmering streamers balance out the more traditional baubles, wreaths, and artificial candles. Downtown, the shop windows are full of fake snow and smiling Santa's. The comparatively cooler evening air makes shopping bearable, but most people are already heading home. It's a time for family after all.

Hanzo catches the eye of a staring woman. He watches her lower her lashes and smile, then quickly turn away. The same thing happens again with a young man, who grins at him and touches the bridge of his nose, then turns to say something to his friend . Another man, middle-aged, sends Hanzo a look that he reads as: *aren't you a little old for that sort of thing?*

Hanzo touches his own nose bridge, where a simple iron barbell pierces across. Similar metal graces his right ear. He's had them a few days and the area is still sensitive -- as are the onlookers, apparently. He had expected some attention, but the feeling is entirely new. Much different than being admired for your status or your muscles.

It was aimless wandering that took him to the body shop. He needed new clothes: a brown jumpsuit with a two-pack belt and an open collar, with cuffed sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. Simple and industrial -- something less conspicuous than his usual fare, but still comfortable enough to breathe and fit with his leg enhancements. He also bought a blue quiver with an attachment for carrying Storm Bow, which might be equally conspicuous, but he's not opposed to being jumped now that his strength has mostly returned. He even fit some pins to the strap; little reminders of home.

Then he saw the body shop and some errant impulse made him wander inside. He thought he might get a new tattoo, but quickly threw out that idea -- nothing could or should compete with the dragons. Then he saw photos of different piercings laid out on the walls, from the basic to shockingly elaborate, all different colors and sizes. A collage of elective mutilation. He thought of Anika and her piercings. Then, in a different sort of collage, others he's met on his journey: Vasu from Kolkata, the bartender omnic in Ho Chi Minh, the prostitute in Hong Kong.

He made the decision quickly, impulsively -- just like with his hair. The woman working at the time was understandably hesitant. She tried to talk him out of it, said this kind of thing should be thought through, but Hanzo's stubbornness held out. He assured her that it's highly unlikely this should obstruct him from future employment.

It hurt. But that was half the point. *A long time coming* , as the gunslinger would say. A snake bite well earned.

The woman lectured him on maintenance while putting the second in his ear, then demanded that he also let her clean up his hair-cut because, as she put it, it looked like he "went to a drunk with a bowie knife."

He's wandering again when he comes across the Japanese neighborhood, and it's there that he sees the cake.

It startles him into stopping. Through the condensed holiday crowd, through many layers of distance both mental and physical, he still glimpses those glazed red strawberries and

immaculate white icing. Like he was looking for it. Like it was looking for him.

It was the one family tradition Hanzo liked. His mother would send for the cake and the four of them -- father, Genji, Hanzo and her -- would eat it in the kitchen or some other informal place. A small few hours, just for them. As if the Shimada family were truly that small, that intimate. As if they were anything like a normal family.

He gets closer just to make sure his healing eyes aren't tricking him, presses his hands to the glass like a child. The cake is simpler than what his family would've enjoyed. The bakers inside all look Japanese, but they're all far from home, so he doubts it will taste the same. But it's there. And so is he.

It's almost annoying -- how his rituals still find him, how quickly habit takes hold. But he's made a lot of big changes in the past couple days; one tradition couldn't hurt. And he's already decided to start trusting his impulses, at least for a while. They've led him to interesting things thus far. The whole point of traveling was to expose himself to new environments, new experiences, and he has held to that rule as much as he is able. This still counts as an impulse, even if it is for something very familiar.

So he gets in line. He also plucks out his new phone, still in its plastic bag, and dials Genji's number from memory.

The youngest answers immediately, "Merry Christmas, Hanzo!"

The eldest lets out his smile. "Still sunning yourself on an Indonesian beach?"

"No, actually -- we're in Nepal again."

"Really?" Hanzo quickly calculates; it wouldn't take long to get a present to Genji, but he'd have to make sure he'll still be there when it arrives. He isn't even sure the Shambali have a proper address. "For how long?"

"Probably through the winter. Zenyatta wanted to be here. Seeing families together made him miss the others, I guess. It snowed hard for a couple days, but it's stopped now. I wish you could see it."

Genji sounds forlorn, which is too strange for Hanzo to address properly. "I see. And are you…" He stops, re-starts, "What are you doing?"

"What, right now?" Genji shifts in his panels, hums behind his mouth-plate. "Writing a letter."

"A letter?"

"Yes, a letter, Hanzo," Genji snickers. "They make pens out of feathers here. They make their own ink, too. Very retro -- you'd love it." His voice is elsewhere, distracted, but in a pleased way. "It feels good. I've really gotten into it. I always liked drawing as a kid. And she always compliments my calligraphy."

Hanzo blinks. "Who does?"

"Angela."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"I see."

"See what?"

"Nothing," Hanzo drawls, eyes rolling across the cafe. He clears his throat, reassumes his old swagger. "You'll never guess what *I'm* doing."

Genji perks up. "What?"

“Hold on.” Hanzo retracts his phone and holds it up to his own face, making sure to include the glass case full of cakes in the background. He takes the photo and sends it to Genji.

Then the youngest brother yells loud enough to startle everyone in the shop, who all turn to look at Hanzo. The archer presses the phone to his chest to block the noise, looking at them with a quick conversion from amused smile to threatening glower. They turn back to their business, and after a moment, he picks the phone back up to his ear.

“-- not my brother, that is some imposter, this is a trap! *Hahaha!* What the fuck! Hanzooooo! You look so cool! What the fuck! Why did you -- who did -- *hahahaha* I’m actually a little worried, are you on drugs!?”

“You’re not the only one who can change his appearance,” says Hanzo.

“Wait, did you do this because of me?” Sly, preening: “did I *inspire* you, Hanzo?”

“No. I needed to throw off pursuers. And I felt like a change --”

“Considering any *alternative* new hair colors, too? I don’t think you could pull off green. You might look rad as a blonde! Did I ever tell you about the time Cassidy had to dye his hair for a job?”

Hanzo sets his jaw. “Perhaps another time. Could you --”

“AHH! One sec, Hanzo!”

There’s a sound like a scuffle, and then Genji’s auto-tuned laughter. Hanzo sighs. He waits on hold while two people in front of him buy their cakes and coffees.

There’s only one left by the time he gets there.

“What can I get you, sir?"

“I'll take--”

There’s a sharp tug on his jacket. A young boy is standing behind him. His clothes resemble Hanzo’s haggard state just a few days ago, face and hands unwashed. Hanzo scans for a parent and finds none. The boy drops his hand and stares at the floor, still as a cornered animal.

Hanzo turns back to the cashier. She looks uncomfortable and apologetic. There are still gross economic walls in Mumbai, as there are in every large city; beggars are common, especially around the holidays. This is not the first child to wander in this store and tug on a stranger's clothes.

Hanzo looks back at the cake.

“I sent you some photos!” Genji’s loud voice reaches. “Did you get them? I’m sorry -- Zenyatta just threw about a dozen snowballs at me all at once. Hanzo! Are you there?”

Just as Hanzo turns to the cashier and lifts his hand, he hears an explosion strong enough to feel through the soles of his feet.

The actual sound reaches after, like distant thunder. Everyone in the shop whirls their heads, looking outside and at each other, alarmed yet ready. An adrenaline calm. Most of them have been dreading something like this for a long time. The news has been dire for weeks.

Hanzo looks at them for only a second before rushing outside and scanning between the skyscrapers.

Past miles of holiday colors, a dark gray cloud rises to the north. People rush past Hanzo to their homes, shelters --anywhere that isn’t on the open street. Sirens put in during Crisis start blaring like the emergency horns from Gibraltar’s air raid test.

Then Hanzo’s met with another impulse.

He runs for the nearest building and climbs. If he stays high, he can avoid the rushing mob and the police at the same time. And he can make it there faster than city responders.

Right before he turns off his phone and shoves it into his pocket, he sees the last photo Genji sent: his real face, visor-free, plastered with snow and grinning widely. Zenyatta is in the background, in his usual cross-legged hover. Holding two metal fingers up in a peace sign.

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The closer Hanzo gets to the explosion, the grayer the world becomes. He's running as fast as he can and the billowing clouds still have him beat. It crawls over the humid city like ink spreading through water while, on the streets below, thousands of people rush for doorways and subways, shouting and shoving and blasting horns. Hanzo believes their panic is justified but doesn't think they're in any further danger; the closer he gets, the more he's sure the explosion happened in the northern IT sector. A single blast -- a precision strike. *Whoever set off that bomb was after something more than a body count.*

It's not until he gets within shooting distance that he realizes it's the Vishkar campus: two rings of wide-open landscaping dotted with curvaceous hard-light buildings, like natural crystals growing upward from clipped green grass. They've already sent out their drones.

Hanzo crouch-walks to the edge of a roof and peeks over. The ominous white spheres, underground security units built for exactly this type of scenario, have dropped their sensor implements and are sweeping the entire outer perimeter with blue laser-veils. Dull, consistent beeps let him trace their path through the dust. They drift in a whirlpool choreography, moving further apart from their point of origin. *Which must be a crater* , Hanzo thinks, *given all this smoke* . His hope of finding survivors is dwindling.

But he has to try. Those drones aren't going to help anyone -- he's seen them before. Their primary objective is to prevent Vishkar technology from falling in the wrong hands. If they come across a non-threat, all they can do is alert the authorities with an automated signal. If they don't knock them out with their emergency sonic defenses first.

Hanzo loads a single arrow. He keeps low, peers over the edge of the roof, calculates the distance. He waits for a drone to turn the corner. Then he aims down, jumps, and puts a bolt through the drone just seconds before he lands right on top of it, crushing it into the pavement with his dragon-toed soles. The arrow stops its path, starts the shockwave sequence, but the blow ensures the mechanism never gets to trigger.

Then he moves on, four arrows between his fingers and one in the bow. The area is a patchwork of debris: overturned food stalls, cooking pots, stools where IT workers would grab a bite before heading back to work. Vishkar owns so much space that most of the impact didn't extend beyond property boundaries. Lucky for the neighbors; unlucky for any tech workers hoping to outpace the competition by clocking in a few holiday hours.

Hanzo keeps low, darts between cover, keeps his eyes peeled for survivors. He finds a few -- people knocked dizzy, stuck under larger debris. Mostly unharmed. He helps them up, checks them for injury, tells them to get to a hospital. They wander out of the dust while Hanzo wanders deeper. Always an arrow on the cable, always his heart beating fast in his head. The faces he passes are wracked with fear, but his own is a steady blank. This is what he's good at. This is what he was built to do.

He passes the outer ring to the ruin that once was Vishkar's main campus. A huge grass lawn, now blackened blades, surrounds two waving buildings around a central skyscraper; all flickering shells of their former glory. Two other projected buildings have been completely annihilated -- a crater that reached low enough to hit the projectors.

They're fading , Hanzo realizes when he scans the remaining skyscrapers. He knows that Vishkar constructs are generated by buried projectors. Different projectors manage different levels of hard-light; while the main supports seem stable (for now), the outer glass and some innards dwindle in sporadic patches, like a bad broadcast signal struggling to maintain the connection. At one point he can see the entire elevator shaft between spots of vanished material, then it's hidden again by windows and walls. It's unnerving to behold: something so huge, so seemingly solid, disappearing and reappearing like a light switched on and off.

With a clenched jaw, Hanzo realizes: whatever wasn't made of hard-light has probably already plummeted to the ground. The heartbeat in his head grows a little louder.

He steps out of the shadow and onto the grass. It crunches under his feet, sends minute clouds of dust and ash past his ankles. Everywhere he looks, the world's apocalyptic -- silent, smoking, but still unsettlingly bright. The color has drained but the sun is still skimming the tops of the buildings to the west, gray and lifeless, yet glowing with all the power of the tropical sun. Hard-light sculptures, exercises in perfect symmetry, look especially surreal against the wide, barren landscape.

Hanzo looks away from them with a locked jaw and moves faster. He's only a few days sober; he's not about to invite more fodder for hallucination.

And he can already hear the support aircraft coming in. They're faster than he thought they'd be.

Then he stops and slowly turns. His gloved fingers grip Storm Bow harder. He squints through the billowing dust and smoke.

He squints until he realizes that he's not hearing aircraft at all; then his eyes flare open under his frown.

Omnics. Hundreds of running omnics.

The horde rushes over the inner ring's open campus with the chaotic clatter of festival drums: the dull *chug-chug* of Bastion units, the quicker *tack-tack-tack* of the raptor-like Slicers, stomping bipedal humanoids and hovering tripod omnics with multiple wire arms and single red-eyes, like cyclops cephalopods. All with their limbs painted white. All advancing from the east with singular, horrifying purpose.

Advancing straight towards Hanzo, who has no exit, save for the flickering skyscraper behind.

He starts moving backward. He lets a scatter-arrow fly and takes down five at once, causing a small explosion -- these are sparse omnics, worn down by the elements and a lack of

resources, vulnerable without decent body-plates. But what they lack in updated technology they make up for in sheer numbers. The loss of five is like a ripple in a lake.

Hanzo turns and makes a break for the Vishkar center. But the lawn is massive, his legs are still weak, and the omnics are much, much faster. Already they are at his heels. He knows he isn't going to make it.

Selfish.

Then a shot rings out over the campus and another small explosion rockets behind him. Hanzo doesn't stop to turn, doesn't slow for an instance. He races, lungs screaming, as another shot rings out.

That's a large-caliber rifle .

He hears a third explosion and the sound of clattering metal limbs. From the echo, he determines: *someone's shooting from the skyscraper.*

So close. The wide base of the building is growing larger and larger, the bottom floors more solid than the flickering top. He can hear the whine of omnic weapons charging and the clatter of their joints, a hammer of loose abrasion that reflects the mad rattle of his own weak lungs.

Then he leaps, grabs the facade, and climbs like he's never climbed before. Another shot rings out and the steel hand that clutches at his foot flies back. He crawls three stories before he crawls into the half-formed hall and collapses onto the hardlight floor. Panting, sweating, but alive.

Someone saved me. Someone very, very good.

Another shot. He can hear the omnics swarming the base, climbing. Hanzo runs.

The elevator shaft is empty, but he's not about to risk climbing it when the elevator could appear at any second. He shoots up the stairs instead, leaping when steps vanish, kicking off walls to get higher. When the stairs end, he descends to the closest floor. He races through flickering hallways, past desks and chairs and break areas horrifically immaculate; as if they were just built yesterday. All of the personal affects must have fallen to more stable lower levels.

Then he rounds a corner and purple gas explodes from the wall beside his head.

He coughs, chokes. *Proximity mine* . The vapor sinks into his lungs, in his eyes, through his pores, until he's practically on his knees by the time she appears.

She left her post to meet him halfway. Eyes watering, he looks up.

And up, and up -- the sniper is tall. *She's all legs,* as the gunslinger might say. High ponytail, wicked good looks. A high-tech suit that hugs a powerful form.

Everything is colorless in that smog, but even then, Hanzo can tell there's something different about her skin. Matte; unvarying.

As lifeless as her voice: *"viens avec moi."*

She doesn't wait for his reply, but steps around him and heads for the elevators. Struggling, Hanzo rises and follows. Already he can hear omnics breaking in through the doors and windows downstairs, or simply passing through when the hard-light flickers. *These are different kinds of omnics* , he thinks. Any advanced AI would've gone for the projectors themselves -- pull the rug out from under them, so to speak. Perhaps something happened to them out there in the tropics. Twisted by the wilderness. Not unlike the archer.

But Hanzo and the French assassin meet the wave when it comes. The faster, sleeker humanoids are already on the second floor, blocking the stairwells and crowding them in with automatic gunfire. Walls and cubicles that once seemed as solid as concrete disappear and reappear in less than fractions of a second. The bullets test that math.

But the woman seems utterly unafraid. Her seven-eyed mask descends, she lifts her rifle and starts shooting one headshot after the other, hardly a breath in-between. Hard-light cover disappears and reappears and she moves with the random pattern, abnormally graceful, as if she knows just seconds before which barrier is about to vanish and which is about to reappear. No movement is wasted. Not a hair out of place.

Hanzo has only seconds to watch her, but the impression resonates. *She looks like a dancer.*

Then he sends a sonic arrow towards the elevator shaft so he can see the other omnics ascending fast. He takes out a couple 'bots that were attempting to flank the woman before unloading a scatter arrow in the stairwell, killing the lot. Cells explode, fire starts, but the omnics keep coming, clamoring through their fallen brethren as if the chaos were birthing more. Hanzo unleashes arrow after arrow, faster than the sniper's shots, as fast as it takes to pull an arrow from his quiver and place it against his bow. He learns the hardlight's tells, sees the flicker that happens when a piece is about to vanish and starts using it to his advantage.

He comes up beside the French sniper to unload bolt after bolt, both of them advancing slowly forward, side by side, bow and rifle making precise and deadly kills. Hanzo takes a bullet across his shoulder, swears, but keeps going. The woman goes unscathed.

When he runs out of arrows, he attacks with his bow. Wielding it like a staff, he swings around the French assassin's three o'clock to eight, while her heels tap softly, inexorably forward. For a moment Hanzo is moving like a demon, adrenaline spiked, slashing and lunging, even thrusting his arm into already broken chassis to rip out wires, while the woman calmly takes shot after clean shot. It's like a wildfire ricocheting around a slowly moving yet equally destructive glacier. He can see it from the corner of his eye: her poise, her total lack of reaction. It churns unease deep in his stomach.

Her rifle magazine ends at thirty, but then a submachine gun opens fire, taking out several omnics at point-blank range. Cinders fly, electricity dances up across and around. *Could've started that earlier* , Hanzo thinks with some bite. *She wanted the challenge.*

He collects his arrows as he fights with his bow, releases them into fuel cells, plucks them out again and shoots to clear a path just as the cells behind him explode. The hard-light traps and then frees the blast, producing odd hazards, but it's effective in keeping the circling horde off their backs. The French assassin looks at him only once, when the shockwave moves her a few degrees off-center, and she sends him an annoyed glance that he barely registers.

He'll think about it later. Her single display of emotion.

Then the broken elevators unload. A huge wave of omnics perforates the two shafts like popped valves as subterranean quakes vibrate through the soles of their feet.

The first lance of real fear makes a wide, distant arch through the archer's chest. "The projectors are failing!"

"Après moi," she mutters, unloading another proximity mine from her side. And then, in a cold sneer, as if to herself: *"le déluge."*

She tosses the mine, he pulls back a scatter arrow, and when the two strike at the elevators' mouths, the glass shatters around the lightning-fast bolts. Gas spreads everywhere, the omnics surge, and then fire from a downed Bastion catches the purple fog and ignites.

Hanzo has run through walls of fire before, but never when it was full of toxic gas and omnics and disappearing/reappearing hard-light constructs. He can feel his weakened body struggle to keep up with the French assassin, who rushes through the blaze and unleashes a grapple claw through a window. Hanzo seizes the claw right after. The cable sings, goes taut, and together they leap from the shuddering building.

The explosion goes nowhere. The hard-light traps it, puts it out with its confused, geometric stylings -- the death rattle of a Vishkar projector's central processor. It reverts to basic three-dimensional forms. It tries to support whatever non-hard-light constructs it has left, then fails altogether. The explosion zips out like a flame in a closed bottle, blue light floods the campus and then disappears like it never was. Smoke drifts up like the last traces of incense as the remaining omnics plummet to the ground.

Hanzo is flying through the air. He feels the cable shudder where the claw is shifting. It fails to keep its grasp under their combined weight and the ledge crumbles. The pair fall, Hanzo reaches out to seize a window ledge, and his body slams against the side of the building just in time for him to catch the sniper with his other hand.

They swing once before Hanzo sees another window open just below her feet. He lowers them both half a yard down the side of the building with one hand. Grunting, he swings her once, and she releases his grip to disappear inside. He un-shoulders Stormbow and follows her through.

Only to come face-to-face with the mouth of her rifle.

“Abandon.”

He freezes in a crouch. He looks at her gun, then glares up at her.

The woman’s seven-eyed helmet stares back, unmoved. “Lower your weapon.”

He scans the area. The entire office is wide and empty -- one of those new open-floor plans the young Vishkar techies like so much. Glass walls surround them where there are walls at all. Behind her, he can see where a balcony ends above a broad lobby, full of reflective blue light -- a fountain down below. If they fight here, it will be bloody.

Not that it’ll even come to that. At this range, her shot would send him straight back through the window.

Literally backed into a corner, Hanzo has little choice but to stand up straight and lift his chin. She hasn't killed him yet. “Have you been following me since Vietnam?”

The woman replies without a beat, and in the same deadened tone as before. “No. We lost you right before you reached Jaipur. We found you again today. Approximately thirty minutes ago.”

Hanzo glares as he puts it all together. Before Jaipur -- that was when he’d tossed his old phone. They must have been tracking it. And half an hour ago is when he’d called Genji from the new one. Which means --

Hanzo raises his loaded bow to aim at the center of her forehead. “You are tracking my brother as well. Why?”

Again, she is unmoved. “We have been tracking you both since you called him from Hong Kong. We were able to re-locate you today through his signal.”

The sheer flatness of her tone, her readiness to unload such infuriating information stokes Hanzo’s anger like nothing else. Genji must’ve switched devices after he’d left Gibraltar, of course -- but Hanzo’s call in Hong Kong led them right to him. All this time, Genji has been in danger.

And it’s all his fault.

Hanzo's arrow shakes against the cable. “Who are you?”

“Lower your weapon.”

“I will not disarm until you confirm your identity.”

“Widowmaker.”

His eyes widen. He recognizes the name: the sniper who killed Tekhartha Mondatta, the most peaceful omnic in the world. Former leader of the Shambali. Genji’s master’s master.

Hanzo had actually hoped to meet her one day, appraise her skill for himself. Just under vastly different circumstances.

But why did she say *'we?'*

Of course: *Talon.*

"Your organization attacked my brother and his comrades," Hanzo snarls. "Why should I not kill you where you stand?"

“Talon has no present interest in Genji Shimada nor Overwatch.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“They have tracked you both for weeks and done nothing. I could have killed you earlier, but did not. I saved your life.”

Then Widowmaker pauses and pans her head a few centimeters to the left. It’s as if she’s waiting for a response, though Hanzo gives none.

Her next words are her most human yet: “Talon has no interest in your family... except what can be done to make it whole.”

Hanzo bares a sliver of canine. A rush of decisions happens all at once. He has no interest in maintaining this tension of weapons drawn, waiting for some external factor to relieve it. He has no plans to die by her bullet, and he can’t deny that her words have sparked his curiosity. If anything, listening might produce an opportunity to turn the tide. Might even provide an opportunity to put an arrow through her Talon head.

Besides, he thinks, *she’s right -- she could’ve killed you at any time. She might even have other agents in the area should you manage to escape her alive.*

Storm Bow lowers, and the arrow returns to his quiver. Widowmaker takes a step back and rests the butt of her rifle on one hip with her hand on the other. Simultaneously, her helmet detaches and swings open.

Hanzo sets his jaw as his eyes move up and down, then up again. Her entire figure has the air of unreality. Perfect posture, not a trace of unease. Covered in state-of-the-art technology. No incriminating marks, save for a ‘W’ on both her rifle and her left jacket shoulder. He’s already counted two tattoos, both arachnid in theme, but recognizes neither as a symbol of allegiance nor fraternity -- more likely they are part of her persona. Some assassins find such a thing helpful: a constructed character to disassociate from the business at hand. *A thousand-yard stare.*

Except that this woman is different. Hanzo has stood across from opponents all his life, both in battle and the boardroom. He learned to observe them closely, to soak in every tell. Extract every shade of weakness. He has manipulated stoic masters fifty years his senior out of their secrets and their lives, but on Widowmaker’s face, all he can see is the haughty impatience of an apex predator. No fear, no anger. She is unnerving in a way he would never admit.

And it's not just her affect -- her skin, now that he really looks at it, is beyond cyanotic. A blue especially cold against her hard yellow eyes, blandly and horrifyingly alert, like that of a wolf.

But his own poker face is nothing to sneeze at. It's also all he has left. She is holding all the cards.

"What does Talon want with me that they could not say in a message? Or in person? Or *before* they attacked my kin?"

"We had to make sure you were the right talent for the job."

Hanzo narrows his eyes. Of course an international terrorist organization would examine his resume by harassing him across half of southeast Asia. "And what job is that?"

"War is coming."

Hanzo bristles. *"Explain."*

"Talon is an organization with many sides." Not taking her gun nor her hand from her hip, Widowmaker looks down at the glass by her feet and nudges a piece. "Some desire conflict for their own purposes. Some desire peace." She toes a second piece towards the first. "All have the same goal: to ride the tides of war with their heads above the water."

"Profiteers," Hanzo sneers.

Without looking up from the glass at her feet: "Some are, *oui.* Was that not in the Shimada clan's repertoire?"

Hanzo lifts his chin. "If you meant to recruit me based on prior experience, you should have more carefully examined my resume. I am no longer the leader of the Shimada clan. My brother and Overwatch destroyed the foundations after I left. Now it is but a shadow."

Widowmaker raises her gaze to meet his. "Even shadows can grow. Talon can restore your family's empire."

There's the offer. Hanzo maintains his poker face. "But at what cost?"

Again, she tilts her head and waits. Hanzo narrows his eyes. What is she *doing?*

"Nothing you seem unwilling to pay for far less." She lowers her hand, gestures with a tired little sweep, like the flutter of a wing. "How long do you plan to work under the title of mere 'assassin,' traveling aimlessly from one kill to another? What honor do you hope to regain by taking on such meager challenges? How do you expect to rise to greatness working for a woman who only sees you as, how do you say…" Widowmaker smirks, "A 'cash cow?'"

Hanzo sneers through cold rage. He stands there and fumes while Widowmaker adjusts another piece of glass, apparently forming some kind of pattern. This is rote work to her -- the lazy confidence of someone playing a fixed game. A spider waiting for her prey to stop

struggling so she can wrap him up and drain him dry. She holds even more cards than he realizes, and she wants him to know that.

Then his blood freezes with a blackened thought: how much of this was *staged?* Was the attack on Vishkar even the omnics' doing? How much of his journey from Gibraltar was manipulated by the invisible hand of Talon? He's heard stories of their grooming techniques, their assimilations. The AI singularity brought with it a whole host of innovative and terrifying sciences; those at the forefront of genetics, bio-hypnosis, and other fields of dark implication used to go missing regularly. A lot of the fringe fields dried up entirely; no one wanted to risk being poached and forced to work for a terrorist organization.

Talon could've manipulated anyone in Hanzo's path to guide him in the right direction. Every moment between Gibraltar and now is thrown into suspicion, but he doesn't have the time to analyze that realization to its full potential.

Then he remembers: they were also listening in Gibraltar. They've potentially heard every meeting, every team meal, every conversation he's ever had with Mei, or Hana, or any of the others. Every brotherly argument. Every night he spent with Cassidy.

They've studied him for months and have come to the same conclusion as Genji: what Hanzo wants most in the world is to prove himself the best.

What's worse is that he can't say they're wrong. It's just that, this whole time, he thought he was looking out for Genji.

Watching Widowmaker's bored glare, he realizes another unnerving factor: *it's like looking in a mirror from the past.*

"You know that my brother wants nothing to do with the clan. You would help me to rebuild an empire of ghosts?"

"Your duty is not to your brother; it is to the Shimada name. A name that will soon disappear after thousands of years of excellence. The approaching conflict will wipe out what is left unless the *oyabun* takes action. And," she taps her heel on a piece of glass, shattering it, and brushes the pieces into place, "While your brother is alive, there is always a chance he will return. He follows an omnic master now, *n'est pas?* He has been in phases before. How long before this one wears off? What happens when the tide of war grows too high and he has no shelter to return to?"

Hanzo lowers his head, still glaring at her. "The fact that he is alive does not change what I did to him."

Then, Widowmaker does something very odd: she looks past the floor. She drifts into somewhere deep inside, far beyond Hanzo's capacity to see. "He is alive. That is all that matters."

Hanzo looks down as well, but at the glass, which Widowmaker starts manipulating again, as if her lapse into reverie never happened. She seems to be forming some sort of bird, but it's

hard to make out. Every point is so sharp that, when it catches the light, it makes Hanzo blink against the glare.

The danger of his position sinks in like so many tiny needles. Talon may let him politely refuse; if they know him at all, they know he doesn't care about any cause but his own. On the other hand, they may only be creating the illusion of a respectful offer, and will kill him should he decline. His gut tells him no, but he can't help thinking how easy it would be. It's what *he* would do. No loose ends; much cleaner.

Looking into her eyes, he realizes: she knows all this. She just doesn't think for a moment that he'll refuse.

"Your attention is flattering," he says, chin high. "But I must follow my own path."

"Talon is not a path. Only," and here she brushes her long, elegant hand over her shoulder, "a presence."

This is it , Hanzo thinks. *This is the punishment* . He knew he wouldn't get out of an indulgent drug spiral without repercussions. Now he's stuck between an unreadable sniper and a fifth-story window with a smoking wasteland beyond. The sound of approaching aircraft is growing louder and louder. She is right -- war is coming.

All at once, Genji's words come back to him: *you are a soldier in this war whether you like it or not.*

Hanzo's eyes widen a fraction of an inch. His mother's eyes -- he's been told a thousand times. He can picture her now: her white silk dress, her red tattoo. Her voice so fresh and real in his head. She would not have him run from this opportunity. She would have him exploit the situation to his advantage, even if it meant his own discomfort. She knew that he hated the piano; she just wanted him to learn that his pains were not important. Obeying the clan, impressing your rivals, broadening your mind: these were worthy endeavors. Discomfort, one's own desires... these are nothing when greatness is at stake. All that matters is the family.

One has to fight to control a single dragon, let alone two.

His mind starts to race. He's already learned more about Talon from this one conversation than he has in all the months since they attacked Gibraltar: that they are led by a group of independent voices, that they hire agents but allow them to retain their individuality, that they wait and watch until springing into action -- like their namesake, they strike from above with precise and deadly force. And he's learned that they're recruiting. Gearing up for something big.

He could learn even more. About their interest in Overwatch. About their hacker -- the one preventing Overwatch from returning. He could get closer to them than anyone on Gibraltar ever could.

And they don't know everything about him. They haven't been tracking his thoughts. They could know about the message he left for Cassidy, could've seen their embrace in the cave,

but they don’t know about all the times he’s thought about him since disappearing in the night. How often he's thought about the rest of Overwatch: Hana, Mei, Lucio. They know he longs for Hanamura’s restoration, but over-estimate the cost he is willing to pay for it. They know he cares about his own superiority, but forget that he would do anything to make up for the crime he committed against his own blood. *That* is his duty now.

Hanzo narrows his eyes at Widowmaker. It really is like looking in a mirror, or, an aspirational one: the perfection he once sought and lost everything for. He can’t deny the reflection. But he can use what he’s learned, his own deadly repertoire, to play this to the advantage of both himself and the group of people he abandoned. The cause his little brother believes in.

Overwatch already believes that he's a Talon agent. May as well play the villain to do something right for once.

He moves forward with many layers of icy confidence. “You still attacked my family. You almost got me killed in your little 'test.' Just because you have not killed me yet means nothing.” Hanzo rests the limb of his bow on the ground, holding it like a staff. “What assurances do I have that Talon will make good on their part of the bargain?”

Widowmaker tilts her head again and finally, he realizes: *she has an earpiece in her mask.* Someone is listening in and telling her what to say.

“Talon has a specific mission that requires an agent with your exact skill set. We will provide you with intel and analysis throughout your engagement. If you perform well, both parties will consider a more permanent arrangement. You will still have complete autonomy. And we will send you regular updates as to the reinstatement of your family’s prominence in Hanamura.”

“A trial period,” Hanzo mutters.

“Yes. And, of course,” she looks back at her collection of glass, “You would have access to local agents for both protection and limited aid. Your previous problems dealing with assassins would no longer exist.”

Hanzo wonders just how many of those assassins were sent by Talon itself. “And you will regularly ensure my brother’s safety.”

Widowmaker pauses before walking towards him. She offers her hand. Under the light, Hanzo can finally see her clearly: cyan blue. Free of scars or blemishes. Free of emotion of any kind.

Utterly brainwashed.

“You have the word of Talon.”

"Such as it is."

Hanzo takes her hand. It’s cold.

“Tell me about this mission."

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Four days after Christmas, Hanzo is riding a private car through downtown Numbani. He’s been here before, years ago, but did not find it to his liking: too new, too streamlined. Trying too hard to be another utopia.

But now the sun-warmed metropolis seems lighter, less oppressive -- more air than metal. He appreciates the acacia trees worked into every outcropping and street corner, the rounded gardens like soft green steps. It’s hard to look anywhere and not see green, whether it's in the foliage or the traffic lights or the omnipresent Kofi Aromo cafes. The towers look like spears or fins, and their glass is layered and touched with something like frost -- not harshly reflective like so many modern buildings. Even the steel is never truly glossy, but burnished and subtle, in shades of tan or ochre or soft blue-gray. He sees many advertisements, but even they seem thoughtfully integrated into the city’s unified aesthetic. The only things that really stand out are the statues of prominent Numbani citizens, purposefully elevated and polished to a mirror shine. Tributes to their greatest natives mark everything from airports to bus terminals: Adawe, Balewa, Olajuwon. There are also places where names have been scored, replaced, obliterated from public memory; as so many noble figures rose high on the great city’s progress, so too did prominent villains.

With Talon’s protection, Hanzo took a jet from Mumbai. It was good to fly again -- he’s always loved being up high. He’ll be in the air again shortly; Rune has booked the penthouse suite.

She sounded congenial enough when he called. Took his apology in stride. The prodigal son returneth. She practically threw the New York job his way, just as Widowmaker said she would, though she saved most of the details for the upcoming meeting. After telling him how perfect he was for this mission, he tried to sound reluctant when he accepted. She should work to get him back, or his newfound enthusiasm might raise suspicions.

But he's still on edge. Deceiving Rune long-term like this presents its own challenges. The assassin’s agent is always startling him with the secrets she manages to get a hold of, the contacts she has. The grapevines she owns. She wouldn't have her position otherwise. It will be difficult to keep this kind of secret from her.

An additional challenge will be Hanzo's new partner. The job calls for two operatives, which is the main reason Rune called for a personal meeting rather than relaying the details via digital routes; a proper introduction, a thorough briefing. Widowmaker said that Talon would be secretly inserting their own operative: a skilled fighter and hacker. If it's anything like the individual that hacked Athena (or, he hopes, the selfsame agent), Hanzo will have to be constantly vigilant. There's no worse type of person to have around when you're trying to double-cross your mutual employer.

His car pulls up to a traffic stop. A soft beeping noise lets everyone know when it is safe to cross the street. Another crowd waits for a bus. An omnic beggar stands off to their side. Even here, the Crisis has dropped its remainders. Hanzo stares through his lowered window at the robot, who wears tattered local patterns, an old baseball cap, and holds a sign with bold black ink in a language he can't understand.

The omnic looks right at him, then at his own sign, then back at Hanzo.

In a cheerful voice, he calls out, "It means, 'I only know that I know nothing!'"

The car starts again, and Hanzo frowns after the omnic, who shows him a peace-sign until they round the corner.

The glass elevator shows just what an oasis Numbani truly is; desert on all sides, pools of blue and green throughout. On Shimada castle's highest roof, Hanzo could see all of Tokyo and Fuji-san beyond. On a clear day, he could see a watery horizon where the whole wide world awaited. He's always seen blue and been inspired: dragons, water, sky. The pleasing assurance of even greater distances. He's always imagined new coasts and smiled as a hopeful conqueror. Now, watching long white birds sail over the mass of Numbani, he thinks of everything on this small blue orb that has conquered him and feels buoyant in the wake. Perhaps not quite humility, but maybe something close to it.

A soft *beep* , and he's arrived. There's only a table under a mirror beside the large, heavy double-doors that open to the penthouse. Hanzo glances at the mirror but doesn't linger. He knows he looks good. He's more than prepared.

He knocks, three sharp raps of his middle knuckle.

The doors swing open and a lipstick'ed kiss lands on his cheek.

"The *oyabun* returns! Woooooww, *love* the new look! I dig that jumpsuit. How are you? Plane ride okay? I know it was -- Numbani Air is fantastic, I'd never ride anything else. It's so good to see you again. Come on in!"

Rune steps aside, sweeps her arm, admitting Hanzo as if the penthouse suite were her dearest home, which it more or less is -- all the world is her dearest home, as long as there's fresh fruit and a high thread count. Every inch of her five-nothing figure is wrapped in a cinched

white suit doubtlessly fresh from Numbani Fashion Week. From her ears dangle real diamonds, on her wrists dangle more. Her gleaming black braids end in glass baubles that click when she moves, like champagne glasses continuously tapping in cheers. Her eyes are bold and brown, the corners of her mouth forever lopsided. Her accent is American, but Hanzo has always suspected that to be an act; Rune is a product of many cultures and can assume any one of them to her benefit. Like the colorful parrot tattooed on her throat, she is a natural mimic.

There's a musty smell as soon as the doors open that makes Hanzo's nose wrinkle, but he attributes it to the previous occupants. Rune doesn't smoke. Not that he's seen, anyway.

"Rune," he mutters, passing inside. The pale penthouse is definitely fitted for high-level business meetings; the dining table looks more like a boardroom table, the chairs are all stiff-backed and elegant, the walls are all glass but have automatic screens that will lower should security become an issue. Talon would be happy with the level of secrecy this apartment affords.

But that smell really is annoying. Surely the hotel staff could do a better job of cleaning; it's the penthouse after all.

"Make yourself at home." Rune closes the door behind him and walks to the kitchen island, a marble swirl outfitted with crystal glasses and decanters. "Want a whiskey? I've been told by a man who would know that it's the best. Although, I remember you like saké? What's your pleasure these days?"

But Hanzo doesn't hear her. Because he finally recognizes that smell. Because the realization has stopped his heart.

Bourbon-vanilla smoke.

"Oh, but first -- I'd like to introduce someone that you've probably already heard of. He's kind of a badass. Just like you!"

Hanzo turns with the full weight of creation on his guts.

He's sitting in the corner beside the door in a low-set lounge area. Hat low over his easy grin. Boots crossed on the gleaming mahogany table. Fat cigar issuing smoke in his metallic left fingers.

Peacekeeper raised and pointed square between Hanzo's frozen eyes.

Easy target.

"Told you I could track y'down a continent away."

The devastation is extensive. Three C-11 projectors, destroyed: the focus of the attack. Three C-234 projectors, heavily damaged: beyond repair outside an engineering lab. Twenty-four auxiliary F-class projectors all survived, but failed to provide adequate back-up when the main projectors failed. An oversight on the architech's part; not enough lifeboats, too great a ship. Reyansh Khanna is the technical advisor. He will know who to hold responsible for this travesty.

But that's not Satya's job. She's only here to see what can be created in the ashes.

It's a horror show, what these omnics have done to the center. This area was a slum before Vishkar came, housed the people, gave them health-care and clean water. Inspired them with nigh-miraculous technology. Their towers held bright minds working towards a brighter tomorrow; now a smoking pyre to the god of chaos.

Satya touches the smooth, flawlessly-white plate that is her left forearm. This mistake will be corrected soon enough.

She steps carefully around the shattered chassis of a sentry. It looks like a porcelain teapot crashed from an open window. It's the only one damaged, and severely so -- completely crushed. Instantly destroyed. Not even time to scan an attacker and send the data to the other drones.

There's also an arrow pinning it to the concrete. *How anachronistic.*

The Vishkar responders can't even get it to budge. They struggle in a crouched circle as Satya comes up behind them, peers over their heads.

"Use your projectors," she says.

They look at her, confused.

She sighs, then opens her palm. A diamond-shaped construct appears. It splits into two pointed wedges, which flatten and insert themselves on either side of the arrowhead -- as thin as light can be. Then they expand from the bottom up, pushing the steelhead out.

Satya uses the wedges to bring the arrow to her waiting hand. She turns it over, touches the wiry end. Positively medieval, yet certainly distinctive.

Glowing from within.

A woman comes up to her shoulder, harried and tired. "Miss Vaswani, Mr. Khanna is at the tent."

She takes the arrow with her. This mistake will be corrected as well.

"My name is Symmetra."

Chapter End Notes

I changed Hanzo's Reflections jacket into a jumpsuit primarily because of inspiration from this fabulous piece of fine art. Also I..... just really like jumpsuits. I'll put him in the jacket soon, don't worry.

The quote at the beginning is from a Mary Oliver poem, "Sleeping in the Forest."

Thank y'all for reading, I really appreciate it! <3

NEXT UP: finally some fuckin Yeehan content in this fuckin Yeehan fic.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Once again, Cole and Hanzo are slung together by fate. But things aren't as simple as they were in Gibraltar.

Chapter Notes

I did some extensive traveling during my long winter hibernation and I'm back with renewed energy. Thank you to everyone who came back to read, I appreciate it! <3

This chapter is from Cole's perspective and the next one will be a continuation!

WARNINGS: mention of past drug use, ~*~alcoholism~*~, violence. The usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a yard in Santa Fe where the cactus stands high along the back of the Five Saints apartments. Cole saw it on his way home from school and had a vision of a soccer goal-post made of thorns. He invited the other kids that same afternoon.

It's a field of last resort, he explains. The only other good fencing in the neighborhood is meant to keep people out, not house people in. They’d either have to break in or play in the street, and that’s not an option; most of their grandparents or aunties or uncles live and work in the area, and if they see one kid risking their life for a game, they’ll come down hard on the whole group.

There's also the benefit of total seclusion, he adds. Cole figures that someone could be watching from the black-taped apartment windows, but he’s never seen so much as a shadow. Maybe they like to let the kids think they’re on their own. More likely, he says, is that no one would ever bother with a prickly little lot like this, nor the prickly little kids who race up and down it from school’s end to sundown. That, or they know who Cole works for, and want no trouble on top of whatever the Crisis has already brought.

He explains all of this, but really, he just thinks it's cool to play soccer under the constant thread of three-inch cactus needles.

“Ahora!” Cole passes the ball to the left wing, Mateo, who dangles it in front of his opponent, Chester. Dust clouds his quick steps, the ball skittering fast and loose under his

sneakers. Chester keeps low and waits. He's a big kid, not too fast, but intuitive. He's not gonna be duped by Mateo's fancy feet.

Cole watches. He runs up the side, away from the net. He cuts directly behind Mateo in a burst of red dust. No one keeps up -- no one even tries. Cole's both large and fast and that affords a certain respect. Plus, there's always the chance that he'll get bored, take a big risk, and make a mistake.

"Pelota, pasamela!"

Mateo slips the ball backwards and Cole takes it again. He races up Mateo's left, past Chester, wheels close to the cacti, so close he can see the spines catch the sky's orange glow. Must be close to sunset. Almost time to leave.

"Aquí!"

Cole shoots to the striker. He kicks like a horse but Diego's used to that; he receives with the flat of his thigh, securing a big welt for tomorrow, and knocks it into the net with a flourish, a neat little half-spin. Like he's showing off for somebody. Cole wonders who.

"Goooooooaaaaaaaalllllll," bellows Natalie, though she's on the opposite team.

Chester collapses onto the dirt. His best friend Hunter nudges him with his foot. Goalie John, embittered, shoves off opposing goalie Ronny as Ronny tries to hug him, carrying on: *hey thanks for everything tonight, dude, really.*

Cole pushes up the dark wet hair at the back of his neck, ties it all up in a squat, messy ponytail. Natalie flicks it as he walks by, but he pays no mind -- he's spotted something under the cacti.

"Eww, don't touch that!"

"No way, man. That's bad juju."

"Awesome. Probably got a whole burrow in there. Maybe under all the cacti."

Cole lifts a yellow scorpion from under the shadow of the tallest cactus. It's as big as his palm, with a stinger like a crooked fishhook, almost pearlescent in the sun. Natalie straight-up walks away, muttering, *nope, nope, nope,* as Cole strokes the darker gray abdomen. Ronny bark-laughs and tries to swat at it, but Cole dodges. Diego tries to swat at it, too, mimicking Ronny. *So that's who he's showing off for* . Makes sense -- Ronny's a looker. A sweet uptown kid who doesn't yet realize he's too good for this impromptu gang.

"You really shouldn't be messing with that. Let it be."

"C'mere, lemme try to hit it with the ball!"

"Estúpido -- te vas a pegar."

"Cállate," Cole mutters, walking off. "He's fine. He's calm. I gotta go."

“You’re gonna come back tomorrow without a hand!”

“That’s how you get dead.”

“Bye!”

“See you tomorrow!”

Cole bends over, plucks up his too-big cowboy hat, and presses it down over his head -- licks the brim with two left fingers, places the scorpion on top. He makes a gun out of his right hand, shoots them all between the eyes, and disappears around the corner.

He takes the main road through downtown so it'll look like he’s coming from the St. Michael school. The scorpion stays still on his hat, or if it doesn’t, he can’t notice. There’s too much around to keep his attention. Once, on his walk home last summer, he saw a coyote with six bleeding eyes at dusk. He’s blinked very little ever since.

And there’s so much to look at in Santa Fe. People from have migrated in since the attacks further east, adding to the already diverse population. Wood-smoke and autumn wind roll through the yellowing aspens and red ristras like the promise of more to come. The drooping sun slides across warm stucco adobes, makes the pale churches gleam and Cole's heart calm. Outside the tourist areas, hover-trucks with foreign plates mix poorly with dusty bikes and cars that should’ve been traded in long ago. Centers for retirees and veterans bunk next to closed-down government offices and dried-up blocks. Holovids aren't hard to find nowadays, and everyone's tuned to the same channel. Everywhere you look, the saffron-yellow quiet makes space for the whole world's anxiety. It’s only been three years since the Crisis started but Cole’s just old enough to remember the time before -- and just wise enough to know how bad it still could get. They don’t talk about it much in school, but he’s hardly there enough to know. *Done with that* , he thinks, walking past the wrought iron gates with his hat pulled down low. There’s only one place he sees doing him or this town any good lately, and it's well outside the tourist center.

The garage is actually a couple buildings on the outskirts of town, put up by bikers, for bikers. Seven or eight hover-cycles are parked alongside defunct parking meters and a hover-truck packed with disassembled omnics. Nothing goes to waste at *el garaje.* Supplies that wind up here aid half the people in the city. Shipments with labels for Los Angeles or San Francisco inexplicably find their way into the back rooms where Cole, ten-year-old Cole, helps unload the cargo into other trucks for distribution around town. In the past six months, he’s been to more storage units than he has soccer games. He’s lost more sweat in those cramped back-rooms than anywhere else. He's making more money than any of his teachers. He’d rather be here than anywhere else.

With his good eyes, Cole can see that Pike is outside, talking to Bianca, the district manager. Pike is covered in road dust and grease stains, but Bianca practically shines in her powder blue suit. She doesn't get stains -- that's Pike's job.

Cole catches Pike's eye with his big presence, smiles at him from afar. The *gringo viejo* is pushing forty but looks older, with tan-gray hair and vivid green eyes -- falsely green, like twin black dice against a felt pool table. Like the alien posters in the gift shop downtown. Two giant wisps hang from either side of his mouth like long handle-bars on a steel hog. His leather vest is dotted with pins that serve as a record for his life and accomplishments: wings silver, gold and red. His arms are strong and tattooed but his gut is as big as his workload, which means he's pretty round these days.

"Cole," Pike grunts in greeting, only Cole is not the name he uses.

"Boss."

Bianca, in the middle of speaking, looks down at Cole with too quick a smile. "How are you today, Mr. Cassidy?" Only she doesn't call him Cassidy.

"Fine, ma'am, how are you?"

"I'm just fine, thanks for asking. How's your mama?"

"She's doin' alright. We're gonna head to the river on Saturday. How's your daughter?"

"Well, she's alright, thanks. Getting ready for middle school. Are you ready, Mr. Cassidy?"

"Go around and help my daughter, Cole," Pike grunts. "She's been waiting for you."

He does what he's told, heads inside, back towards the big table near the kitchen, where he and Yolanda answer messages for Pike. They don't talk, and they don't play around. This is work that they both take seriously.

Cole lifts his head only when Pike finally comes in. He watches him fall into the aluminum chair with a rattling sigh, a cold beer in one hand while the other cracks its own knuckles.

"What'd Miss Bianca want, boss?"

"Gus and Julio got into a fracas with some tourists at La Placita Puebla. Wants us to tell the boys not to go so hard on the newcomers. Might be more of 'em come summer." He shakes his head, staring through the long concrete space out the open back doors and beyond. "Not gonna be good for us. New neighbors replacing the old. People who don't know what we're all about."

Cole glances at Yolanda, but she's concentrating on her work. She's been deaf since birth, but probably wouldn't be interested. Cole's only learned to sign a couple key words so far anyway.

"What needs to be done..." Pike continues, under his breath, his thousand-yard stare staring down the end of whatever thought he'd discovered in the pause.

“What did they do?”

“Who?”

“Gus and Julio.”

“Oh,” Pike scratches his chest, right over the eye of a big open-winged vulture. “Smashed up their cars. Might’a broken somebody’s nose.” He sniffs, plucks a half-finished cigar from the cigarette carton sticking up from his pocket. “If I find out more’n alcohol was involved, I swear…”

Cole glances back at Yolanda and she meets his eyes with her big dark stare, open yet foreboding. Like that violet-tinted storm he saw above the abandoned Sears last week.

Then the boys walk in. Gus, sans Julio, but Tomas and Sam and Fernando and Abe. All tattooed, all talking a mile a minute. Leather and denim and pins of their own. Steel through their ears and noses and God-knows-where else. Brash young renegades fresh off the road, a beer a piece, ruffling Cole’s hair and nudging him over for a seat at the table.

Yolanda doesn’t say anything, just picks up her work and moves it to the office upstairs.

The topic of the day is fights, past and future. Men who pissed them off and got what was coming to them -- *“we all got it coming, kid,”* someone quotes, snort-laughing. They talk about the tourists and the Crisis. They don’t stress about attacks: *mañana,* things will come in God’s good time and they’ll be there to face it when it does. Definitely take care of the garage, what with the stockpile underground.

They glance at Cole and change the subject. They ask him about his day, they let him try their beer, teach him about what’s good on the shelf and what to leave alone, take him through their own personal histories with certain whiskey brands like they’re describing tumultuous marriages. He listens, but mostly talks -- he's a good talker, and getting the boys to laugh is like an addiction.

“Eat up, boys.”

Pike comes out with a vat of red chili and they eat while the conversation switches, inevitably, to bikes: models, features, maintenance, repair. Pike is their guru, the gear-whisperer, but he doesn’t add much to today’s discussion aside from disagreeing grunts and acquiescing sighs. He’s still mad at the miscreant members. They all sense it. After dinner, he delivers a two-sentence talking-to that renders them all silent. All except for Eskiminzin, who uses the rare lull in banter to tell them all, for the hundredth time, about when he almost died on a long hiking trail near Reno with a friend who kept repeating, “But it’s a dry heat,” all twenty miles, until they passed out at a pool hall with two jukeboxes full of nothing but early Merle Haggard. When they woke up at dawn, the jukeboxes were gone, but the music still played at half-speed through speakers they were too scared to look for.

When 8:00 pm rolls around, Cole takes off. The others hem and haw, try to ply him with more beer and stories, but he’s got a date to keep. Pike offers him a ride and he takes it. He clings to the denim vest and stares out at the rushing scenery. The stars are out, the wind

across the bike is cool and clean, and by searching for that six-eyed coyote, Cole's eyes adjust to the dark and take in so much more than they would have otherwise. They drive deep into the canyon, up and over, twist around roads almost too narrow for trucks, under the elevated tracks that bring them more loot they could ever hope to steal.

"Listen here," Pike says in the parking lot. "Gotta couple new jobs for you. You're gonna take trips up the canyon with the boys. Errands and clean-up only. Understand?"

Cole nods, slides his hat off his head and holds it in front of him like a prayer. It's only then that he notices the scorpion is still hanging on, peaceful as the stars overhead.

"You'll start running his errands after awhile, but you finish school, y'here? I don't want no truant officer comin' round the garage after your ass again. We got enough fires to deal with."

"Yessir."

"And I wanna start an after-school club."

Cole snorts out surprised laughter. "Why?"

Pike grins. "Shooting gallery. I want you to teach some o' the younger members how to handle a gun. Think you're up for it?"

They both know he is. Cole's aim is so good, none of the boys like to talk about it. Like it'll jinx it if they do -- or jinx themselves into deserving it.

It means the world that Pike wants to do this. Cole hopes he can tell.

"Sounds good to me, Pike."

"Hn." Pike looks down at Cole's scorpion, then grins up at Cole. "See you tomorrow."

Cole watches Pike ride off until he's beyond the realm of sight. Then he lowers his hat to the pavement, nudges the scorpion, and sets it towards a pile of succulents beside the diner. They're taking over the Panorama. Soon the owner will be tearing up the lot on both sides. Can't have the place looking sloppy, now that so many are coming through from the east.

He walks inside and is instantly smacked in the face with the scent of burnt coffee, sizzling eggs and frying bacon. Saturated fluorescents hits the walls and floor in a strange aqua glow, and it sure doesn't do the peeling red booths any favors. But there's a jukebox and space for dancing and Cole likes it almost as much as the garage. He gives the manager a nod as he slips into a stool and waits with his long legs dangling free.

Then Gloria emerges in her white-cuffed uniform and a coarse leather jacket a couple sizes too big. She pets Cole's hair in a way that makes the curly ponytail fall loose as she slips into the stool next to him. "Hey there, sweetheart. How were things?"

“Hey, mama.”

“You do your homework? You listen to Miss Germania?”

“Yeah.” He looks up at the menu, then across at her. “Can I have huevos rancheros?”

She grins her smile, slow and huge and a little mischievous. Eye-catching from a mile away. Brighter than the diner’s neon sign, broader than the canyon outside. Everybody tells Cole that he has the same one.

She looks hopefully at the manager. He sighs, nods, and calls to the kitchen with Cole’s order.

Then Gloria cups her son’s chin, kisses his temple. She orders coffee and a glass of milk. “You play today? Did you see Ronny again? That’s the one you like, right?”

But Cole isn’t listening. He’s looking across the counter at a pale, jumpy man, with wisps of white hair and a steel gray jumpsuit. He’s complaining to Diane about his milkshake. He looks like an alien and sounds like something worse. There’s not enough ice cream, he says. It tastes like watered-down bullshit, he says. This whole town wouldn’t be here if he and his friends hadn’t fought in the battle of Corpus Christi to stop the omnics from advancing through southern American soil. He bled for the army and all they gave him in return was a weak pension and a hole in his chest and this goddamn watery milkshake.

Gloria tries to distract Cole, asks him what he’d like to listen to on the jukebox. But Cole still stares.

The old man’s right. Why should you take only what you’re given?

“Drink your milk, Cole.”

The cowboy brings it forward, slurps up the red-and-white striped straw. He imagines it to be a milkshake: tall, chocolate, with whipped cream and a fat red cherry. “Hey. Mama.”

“Si, mijo?”

“I know what I wanna be when I grow up.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

Cole plucks an imaginary cherry and pops it directly into his wide grin.

“I wanna be a gangster.”

“What is he doing here, Rune?”

“Uhh, Cassidy, what’s with the gun, buddy? You guys know each other?”

“Ain’t that a question. Thought I did once. Never been more wrong in my life.”

“Uh. Okay? Let’s just all stay calm here.”

“What is he doing here, Rune?”

“Okay -- hold on!” Rune puts down her drink and comes around to throw her hands up between Hanzo and Cole. At barely five feet tall, it’s a little like throwing a chihuahua in between two dobermans. “Cassidy, put the gun away. This is *my* suite. Y’all aren’t about to fuck up my business with whatever trouble you’re bringing with you. You have any idea what hotel security is like in Numbani?”

“This fool,” Cole gestures with Peacekeeper, “Joined up with my group for three months and then left us high and dry the night before we got raided. Took off cold and not a word since.”

“Not a word--?” Hanzo hisses, flaring like a cobra, “I have texted you three times since you sent those photos. I called you. I left a message.”

Cole sweeps out both hands in a careless shrug. “Well, I ditched that phone, partner. Get a new one every week. You left a message for nobody.”

Hanzo enrages. At least, it looks like rage to Cole. He’s seen the archer angry dozens of times: at himself, at Genji, at some other agent. The worst was when he was angry at the past, with no outlet for his frustrations but the bottom of a bottle. Cole's been at the receiving end of Hanzo’s anger more than a few times -- mostly after cheating at cards or fudging the numbers in the training bay, as a joke. Then Hanzo would get right up in his face, threaten him from top to bottom, insult him six generations back, and *loud* . The archer had a booming voice when he wanted one. The cowboy usually let him go, tuned him out or laughed him off, if nothing else because it is the fastest way to diffuse the situation. He didn’t mind. He had a temper, too. And Hanzo is so damn beautiful when he's angry.

Yet somehow, two months later and a thousand miles in-between, in a plush penthouse on top of Utopia, the archer looks even better. The air cooled and electrified the second he walked in. Ozone and something Cole had never been able to name (likely he isn't even privy to the world of fine colognes Hanzo’d had access to since puberty) struck him like a blunt arrowhead. Cole saw the hair, the piercings, the clothes, and for a moment fancied that he was dreaming, that he was idiotically fastening Hanzo Shimada’s face onto some punk bounty-hunter’s body. Then that imperial voice hit the airwaves and the tendons in his neck snapped like horse reins. More jarring than the first moment he’d laid eyes on him. More

jarring than the time he chucked a glass bottle at him from three stories up. How is it that this asshole gets more handsome every time Cole sees him?

“You sent those photos to insult me, you disrespectful hick.”

The gunslinger bares his teeth. “If I did, you’d deserve it, y’blood-betrayin’ son of a bitch.”

Hanzo lunges. Cole stands his ground, ready to swing, but doesn’t need to -- Rune grabs Hanzo’s wrist and does some kind of aikido-move with his arm, taking his energy and whirling him around until he’s facing the opposite direction, grunting from the strain.

Cole lets out a surprised bark of a laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, Cassidy.” Rune releases the archer, who whirls around only to glower at her pointed red nail. “And don’t you gimme that look. You both can fuck off right now, I am not joking. If you got beef this deep, then maybe you need to leave. I’m not giving the job to two shitheads who might kill each other on day one. There’s the mother-fuckin' door.”

Hanzo stills, coiled -- poised to take any and all action. Cole stares him down like a duelist at high noon, waiting for his opponent to either throw down his pistol or draw. He glances back at Rune, who glances at him, and he looks at Hanzo, who’s staring only at Rune.

Then the archer drops his shoulders and cross his arms. He throws his haughty fury to the table rather than either person before him.

Cole frowns hard, disguises a sigh of relief with an ostentatious whirl of his gun, sliding it into his holster with a heavy noise. His hands raise to his hips and he looks expectantly at Rune with every cylinder his mind can muster running on overdrive.

Why would he stay? What does he want?

“No?” Rune looks back and forth between the bristling men. “Then let’s talk.” She steps sideways to the table and gestures up its length. “Would you like to sit down, or should we just keep standing around like pissant --”

“I will do nothing until you explain why he is here,” says Hanzo.

“He’s here for the same reason you’re here. I hired him. That’s my job. Why aren’t you letting me do my job?”

“How is he on your list? He is not an assassin.”

“I have much more than assassins in my rolodex, Hanzo. Bounty hunters, mercenaries, soldiers-for-hire... whoever’s best for the job.”

“But he’s --!”

Then his mouth snaps shut and he looks at Cole with darts in his eyes.

Cole sucks in a silent, sudden breath. His cigar goes out. *Cupid’s got a clean shot.*

“He’s what, Hanzo?”

Air seems to leave Hanzo's big shoulders as he straightens, crosses his arms, and fires his clean shot into the air. “He *was* Overwatch.”

Cole breathes out as more questions flood in, but his face stays locked in a deadly grimace. Peacekeeper may be packing, Hanzo's the one with the loaded weapon here.

Rune snorts, “I don’t care if he *was* the Pope. He’s the right man for the job and the perfect partner for you. He’s got years’ worth of black-ops training, he’s a famous mid-to-close-range fighter, and he’s ten times better with people than you are.”

“Aw, now don’t you go flattering me, Rune,” Cole covers his own nerves with slick sweetness, “I just might stick around your fancy digs a few days extra.”

Hanzo sneers. “He is brash, undisciplined -- a *liar* . Nevermind that we would be heading into an area full of desperate people itching to collect on a six-million dollar bounty.”

“Sixty million,” Cole corrects, eyeing his nails. “And I’m a bonafide expert at layin’ low.”

“What part of that sixty-million dollars accounts for this ability to ‘lay low?’”

“What part of ‘abandoned his team in their hour of need’ seems like the kind’a person that should take on a job like this?”

“I did not know you were about to be attacked!”

“And you couldn’t’ve known, ‘cause you took off like a goddamn snake through the grass!”

All at once, massive shutters clatter over every towering window. Cole glances over his shoulder -- Rune is at the oaken table’s closest end, tapping away at a holographic control pad. The sudden darkness is obliterated by a single point of light above the table, where a huge three-dimensional map emerges from nothing and hums like a generator. The sudden flood of bright blue light startles both men into silence.

“Listen up.” Rune walks to the opposite end of the table, keeping a finger on the holopad so that it trails after her. The white parrot tattoo on her throat jumps with her angry pulse. “I didn’t work my ass off organizing this meeting so I could listen to you two fight like an old married couple. I don’t care if only one of you takes the job, both of you do, or *neither* of you do -- but you’re not going to waste anymore of my time.” She stands with her back to the windows, glower visible from afar. “I am going to give this briefing. If you still wanna claw each others’ eyes out afterwards, you can leave knowing that someone else will be collecting.” She looks at both of them in turn, singling each out with dollar signs in her eyes. “And I do mean *collecting.* ”

Like a rusted-out machine, Hanzo rumbles all the way to a chair. Cole follows suit, taking the seat directly across. Just to bother Hanzo, he lifts one heavy boot at a time and crosses them on the table.

Rune sighs. “Great.”

Then she taps a few more commands and the map shifts, zooms out, and reveals Greater New York City: bridges, skyscrapers waterways. Details jut and coalesce, move more like live video feed than static hologram.

Hanzo crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. “Manhattan?”

“I told you that this would be an infiltration and large-scale omnic elimination job, but I didn’t tell you what you’d be infiltrating.”

Rune taps a few more commands and a red circle zeroes in on an island just off the western coast of Manhattan -- Staten Island.

Cole grunts. “That’s the old Watchpoint.”

“Which is why you’re perfect for this job, *Cassidy* ,” says Rune, throwing the word at Hanzo. “A group of rogue omnics have turned it into a fortress. They’ve been attacking civilian centers for months and their ranks are growing fast. You two are going to clean house.”

Rune taps a command and little red dots appear on the waterways surrounding the island, running up and down like debris on the currents: aquatic omnic patrols.

“They’ve set up a quarantine. Feds think they’ve been using Overwatch technology to broadcast a signal to recruit other omnics in the area, but no one can block it. No one can even isolate it. And no one can get in to stop it, mostly because of how this particular Watchpoint's design. You know what they used to do here, Hanzo?”

The archer tilts his head. “Trash collection?”

Cole glares while Rune clicks into a closer aerial shot of the compound -- internal schematics notably lacking. “Large-scale weapons development. Watchpoint: New York is one of the most secure facilities ever constructed on Earth, to this *day,* because infiltration would’ve meant potential compromise of nuclear weapons, missiles, experimental technologies -- you get the idea. After Overwatch disbanded, they cleared it out and locked it down, but now the state department thinks the omnics have managed to start it up again, manipulated the system somehow… or implemented something of their own. No one really knows. A dozen US agents have already died trying to get in.”

Cole lowers his boots to the ground.

Rune zooms in on Manhattan itself. “The omnics have not only locked down the Watchpoint and the waterways, they’ve started conducting attacks on the island residents. After they took out a major defense center on the southern tip, the US government put out an encrypted SOS through a third-party. I, of course, won the bid.”

Hanzo mutters, “And they have not simply sent in the army or bombed it yet because…?”

“Because, technically, the Watchpoint is UN property, and Geneva hasn’t decided how to proceed yet.”

“Of course not.”

“Likely they’re worried anything bigger than a small missile will activate old defense systems.” Cole re-lights his cigar and puffs blue smoke over the table. “They shoved Overwatch out so fast, they probably lost their minds over all the classified stuff and didn’t think too much about the rest. You, uh… ever get a hold of the engineer in charge?”

“Torbjörn Lindholm is currently MIA, according to my sources. I actually hoped you might help out with that, Cassidy. You and him being former associates and all.”

Cole links his fingers behind his head. “Can’t say. Haven’t heard from him in a long while.”

His gaze alights carefully on Rune, but his peripherals strain to take in Hanzo. Again, no reaction. He chances a quick glance under the guise of going for a cigar, but the archer is still. Hardly seems to be breathing.

What does he want? Why did he stay?

Rune continues on, now meandering back up the length of the table. “Well, the locals may know enough to help you out. Most used to work for the Watchpoint.” Seeing Hanzo’s confused glare, she elaborates: “After the Crisis left most of the city in ruins, the Watchpoint hired engineers, physicists, skilled laborers of all kinds. They rebuilt the infrastructure, defensive developments. The mayor even requisitioned skyscrapers as new housing to make up for what was destroyed in the floods. After the Watchpoint closed down, the government persuaded most of the Overwatch employees to stay with more development incentives. It’s starting to look like a city again, but they still don’t have the means to deal with the Hive.”

Hanzo grunts, “The Hive?”

“It’s what the locals are calling the omnics.”

“How original. So neither the US government nor Overwatch-trained engineers can find a way inside, but you think we can?”

Rune scoffs, rolls back her impressive shoulders. “Well, I would’ve asked Soldier: 76, but he doesn’t exactly take calls.”

“That vigilante who everyone thinks is Jack Morrison’s ghost?” Hanzo snorts. “Ridiculous.”

Cole frowns, “Ridiculous and impractical -- Grand Mesa wasn’t guarded by a hundred omnics.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, you and Hanzo are a lot younger. I’m sure you’ll come up with something.”

Rune clicks through more commands and the map zooms out, showing a green line tracing a route from Long Island to Staten. “I can smuggle you in on an air drop around here,” A red circle appears across a south-eastern strip of beach, “But you’ll have to make your own way west. And you’ll have to be careful in these outer boroughs – the local government doesn’t patrol these areas, especially nowadays, so it’s become something of a Wild West. Or, a Wild East.”

“My specialty,” Cole drawls.

Rune sweeps her hand over the holographic control pad; the map disappears like it never was. In an expertly mimicked replica of Cole’s accent: “ain’t it just?”

“Reckon you’ve snagged yourself a real attractive contract there, miss Rune.”

Rune smiles and fans her face, but just as soon as some good feeling starts to eke into the room, Hanzo’s tone shoots across the room like a sniper’s bullet: “how much up front?”

Rune smiles even wider: the cat that got the canary. She clicks another button and a dollar amount appears on the holographic screen. “To be wired directly after this meeting. You’ll both get the same amount after completion.”

“That is acceptable.”

Then he rises and starts for the door. Cole stands up like he’s just being polite, but his hand dances across the steel spur on Peacekeeper’s grip, making it twist like a wheel of fortune.

Rune follows Hanzo as the window shutters all slide open. “Hey, wait! So you’ll do it? You’re not gonna give me trouble about Cassidy?”

Hanzo pauses before the door and half-turns. Slots of daybeams strike him like headlights. He easily glides a lofty look over both of them, then glances around the penthouse, as if it, too, is beneath his consideration. “I am *yakuza.* We are not in the habit of abandoning temporary, *lucrative* business simply because we do not personally admire our business partners.”

Then he passes that glare to Cassidy -- a challenge as sure as any he’d ever hurled all those months ago.

Rune turns to look at him, too. Dollar signs back in her eyes.

Cole puffs on his cigar slow and easy. There’s a strange lassitude beyond the whirling motor of his mind, beyond all the questions scraping for dominance. In the clear blue sky above all his whirling considerations, one question rises like a thing signal of smoke: how can he hold a venomous snake in one hand and keep Peacekeeper steady with the other?

Because there’s no way he’s abandoning this job, and there’s no safe way of shooing off Hanzo without attracting more unwanted attention.

So he blows out an easy cloud of smoke and chuckles. As if he’s back on that cliff in Gibraltar and humming *Summertime* . As if Hanzo is just another desert reptile he’d handled as a child.

“Took the words right outta my mouth, partner.”

Negotiations are tense. After further mission details (specs, equipment referral, dates and times), Rune demands every possible assurance that they will work well together, the brunt of which is left up to Cole. Hanzo lingers against the wall with crossed arms, hardly offering single-syllable words to aid the gunslinger's case. By the time they leave, Rune seems positively cheery, but Cole has had just about enough. His boots fall like loaded guns all the way to the elevator, where he lets Hanzo in first so he can be closer to the door. Then he punches the close button repeatedly and crosses his arms, determined not to give the bastard the satisfaction of getting under his skin.

It lasts for a total of three floors.

"You got a lot of fuckin' nerve, Shimada."

"I suggest you wait until we are clear of the building before you attack. If Rune is compromised, neither of us will ever work with her again."

"I ain't gonna *shoot* you. What's your fuckin' game? You ain't even built for this job -- what's a big-shot assassin want with a fat infestation mess like this?"

"I believe we just had a lengthy presentation as to what my game is."

"Don't play stupid." Cole whirls around, faces down the dragon with his own brand of fire. "What're you after? I know you don't give a shit about random civilians or occupied Watchpoints."

Hanzo remains still, though he no longer looks at Cole with anger. If anything, his demeanor has changed entirely -- a soft off-brand of the rage he displayed in the penthouse. African sun burnishes his features like a stark photograph, like some saccharine Western from Cole's youth. Like the calm outlaw before his sentencing. It's unnerving, and Cole feels his anger threaten to wane.

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Y'ought'a know why I'm doin' this."

"I suppose I do." Hanzo looks Cole up and down, lingers on his chest. Cole remembers what Mei said about that -- *in his world, it's considered almost rude to meet someone's eyes.* "Did Winston put you on to it?"

"Winston ain't involved. Y'ought'a know *that* from Genji. I know he's called you."

"You two are not very good at keeping any kind of radio silence, are you?"

"We know what we're doing. Done it a million times before. And I wasn't about to let him run off to Nepal without checking in on him from time to time. Man had a lotta shit to say after you left." Cole crosses his arms, venom in his eyes. "Kinda' shit you only feel like talkin' about after your *second* near-death experience, y'hear?"

Hanzo sighs through his nostrils. "Ah." He maintains his lock on Cole's eyes, though a gloom enters. "I am sure he was very angry after it happened."

“Damn straight.”

“And I am sure he had much to say that you were quite ready to hear.”

“Born ready.”

“And I’m sure that you are aware that I spoke with my brother a few days later, and that we have maintained amicable relations since.”

“Don’t doubt it.”

“But you have decided something," mutters Hanzo, marbled eyes finally lifting to search Cole's own. “You have altered your judgment of my character."

The cowboy clenches his jaw around a thousand potential retorts, but winds up just shaking his head and about-facing. He pushes the stub of his cigar back up to his mouth, still taking his time with the smoke. No rush. Don’t act hurried. He softens his tone to match Hanzo's. “Don’t matter now why I was wrong then. I’m not wrong now. But I’m not about to give up this job over your sorry ass.”

“I see.” The archer lets the pause hang, then regains his business-like tone. “If you intend to protect the Watchpoint at all costs, that may make our task all the more difficult. You must attempt to contact Mr. Lindholm so that we can proceed with as much information as possible.”

The doors open and Hanzo passes swiftly. Almost clips Cole’s shoulder.

The gunslinger follows with a low voice. “You don’t gotta worry about it. The Watchpoint’s my business. My responsibility. If some gang of omnics are holed up inside, then it’s my job to flush ‘em out.”

Then Hanzo laughs. It’s short, raspy like always, but bizarrely warm -- unlike anything Cole has heard from him before. Like he'd pulled it out of another time and place. Genuine. Almost *fond.*

The gunslinger walks faster just to get a better look at that smirking face under the warm lobby light. This close, he notices more of what’s different. The darkness under his eyes, the greater gauntness to his cheeks. The soft, short hair at the base of his neck, the pewter barbell through the bridge of his frowning brow. What on earth could’ve happened to make Hanzo Shimada change his look into something Cole could've sworn Old Hanzo would hate?

He’s seen some shit .

Cole jumps off a train of emotion before it careens into something that isn’t righteous anger. “What’s so goddamn funny?”

The smile on the archer’s face is subtle, yet unmistakable. “Your undying sense of duty.”

“Well, you’re one to --“

“It is admirable.”

The gunslinger’s feet stop moving.

But Hanzo goes on, passes through the revolving doors and into the waning sunlight of mid-afternoon. "I missed you, cowboy."

Cole’s chest rises about an inch higher with the steeling breath he takes. He stares at Hanzo’s blurred image through the still-spinning doors, takes a full minute before remembering his anger and striding through.

“Wish I could return the favor.”

Hanzo chuckles again, turns out towards the sidewalk crowd. “I do not believe you.”

"Don’t give a good goddamn what you believe. You *left* us. You left Genji. He was real broken up about it.”

“I don't believe that this is about Genji.”

Cole backtracks, scrambles for something to catch the matchstick of his rage. “If you missed me so much, what was that upstairs? Don’t act like you ain’t got a problem with me.”

Hanzo takes up a more detached tone as he wanders forward. “I did not expect to see you. I knew you would be hostile towards me. And, if I recall your pointed gun correctly, I had every right to be defensive.”

Cole chews his cheek. “Pretty sure I had every right to point that gun.”

“Hn . Perhaps. Perhaps you think I am a spy, like the others.”

“Pfh. Nah.”

Hanzo tilts his head. “And why not?”

Cole shrugs one shoulder, glowers at the road. His chin leans up as they stride toward the line of waiting taxis, as if he is consulting the sun.

Finally: “don’t make no sense. What kinda spy takes that much time to refurbish a place he plans on leaving so soon? Cutting grass and the like.”

Hanzo smirks again. “Perhaps I just enjoyed passing the time with hard work.”

“You bonded with the team, too. Why help Mei? Why chat with Rein, or Lúcio? Why take Hana to Lisbon?”

“I went to Lisbon to contact Rune.”

“Come again?”

“I was already planning to leave. I had to contact her from a place I knew would not be traced and I needed a good alibi for doing so. Your AI is far too intrusive. Miss Song merely presented a good opportunity.”

“You just --”

“My reconciliation with Genji was going nowhere.” Hanzo eyes the cars, scanning as if searching for exactly the right one. “Staying would have only resulted in another fight. I would have left with a proper farewell, but after that night…” He sighs through his nostrils, addresses Cole with a pointed gaze. “I apologize for my reaction to your enhancements. It was inappropriate. And I apologize for not being there to defend the base. But I will not apologize for leaving, nor for cutting contact. I did what I had to do.”

The cowboy breathes out. Years ago, holed up in some dusty hovel, hiding out from the law and his own mistakes, he might’ve given his old comrades similar lines. *I had to go, y’all. You didn’t see what I saw. You didn’t know him like I knew him. Things were looking dark. Things were going south. But I’m sorry all the same. Sorry I disappeared. Sorry I didn’t say good-bye. Sorry I wasn’t around to help.*

Hanzo starts for a taxi, waving for the driver’s attention.

Cole follows. “Hold up now! Tell me what you’re up to, Shimada!”

“Cassidy, you can exhaust yourself with trying to figure out my motivations, or you can focus on the task at hand. I, for one, will be occupied with the latter.”

An evasion. For Hanzo, a sloppy one. Either he doubts Cole's ability to suss out the truth, or he thinks he'll give up before making any headway.

Or, more likely -- he doesn't give a fuck what I do. 'Missed you' my ass.

But Cole knows he won’t get anywhere by asking. Nothing forthright ever seemed to work with Hanzo before. Like Genji once advised: *come at him sideways. Bide your time, cowboy. He can’t hide forever.*

Just try to keep from dying in the meantime.

The gunslinger just takes one good puff from his cigar and watches the archer open the taxi door and speak to the driver. He rests his metal hand on the door and hunches to keep his low tone for Hanzo’s ears only. The now-short cigar dangles in the corner of his mouth. “Had to do a lot of convincing to get Rune to think we’ll work well together. You think you can keep up the ruse?”

“No ruse required,” Hanzo says as he stands straight again. “We *do* work well together.”

Cole scoffs. “Where’d you get that idea?”

Then Hanzo shoots him dead with those wild black eyes. “Desert 04.”

Then he gives him a look that goes down and up Cole's body, starting at his flashing belt buckle and ending at his stricken gaze. Pewter steel glints between those wicked brows. A crime boss with his eye on the prize.

Cole feels white lightning race up his spine and scatter any potential come-backs to the wind.

Then Hanzo slips into the back seat. "See you at oh-six-hundred, *partner."*

For some reason, Cole is the one who pushes the car door shut. Then the taxi takes off with a quick jerk, merges into the lane and disappears into traffic.

And the gunslinger stands there, staring at nothing, for a full minute. People shuffle past, going about their weekday with briefcases and backpacks. The soft tones of Numbani traffic signals direct their way. A street-sweeping omnic beeps once, twice, a third time at double the volume, until Cole finally startles and steps out of its way.

Nothing doing. He lets out a frustrated growl, a puff of smoke, and tosses his cigar into the street-sweeper's path before making tracks for his motel. He's got a lot of prep to complete before the early-morning rendezvous.

Only one thing's for certain: he can't back out now. Not with what's at stake. Not with the real job he carries.

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Three Months Ago.

A red Ford truck takes himself, two shotguns, four cases of ammo and two changes of clothes all the way from New Orleans to New Mexico just two weeks after leaving Gibraltar. He can't remember the last time he'd traveled this far just to meet one man, but it's the only option available. He can't return to Santa Fe. Can't skirt too close to Albuquerque either, not with his bounty -- not without a wig and a fat suit. There are others who might have information on the connection between Blackwatch and Talon, but there's only one of those who definitely won't shoot him on sight, and that man won't travel east of Roswell. Especially not for a Deadlock-dropout like Cole Cassidy.

The bar is a haunt, full of men who probably split their time between their bikes and the barstools, maybe a stranger's bed if they play their cards right. Cole slides in casual, removes

his hat, acts like a regular. In some ways, he is -- the only type of regular here is the townie or the blow-in, and he covers the latter definition every which way. He checks the open kitchen past the bar, the cooks working hard and chatting harder. Walking in before sunset doesn't mean a softer crowd in places like this; a group of young gangsters are already getting rowdy at the counter, the *other* group of young gangsters is on what looks like their third pitcher of beer. The front windows are like square portholes, small and double-glass. There are no omnics, and Cole didn't run into any on the curb. Much of the lesser south resisted omnic employment after the Crisis and not much has changed since, even with the new incentives. *Slow minds change slowly* , he reminds himself.

Cole can't shake the feeling that he's been here before. It's certainly a possibility -- the southwest is full of people and places he might've encountered at one point but was too high or drunk or blazed on adrenaline to remember. Slow minds might change slowly, but living fast makes for a poor memory. *Motion-blur* , Ana used to call it. Some photography term. Just like target practice -- *you have to lead them to get your shot.*

He takes a seat at a small table near the bar, with a good vantage point of both the front entrance and the mysterious back rooms. He places his hat on the nearest chair and orders a whiskey neat from the pretty waitress with the long black hair.

Five seconds later, he checks the clock on his phone: Pike's late. He's late and all Cole can do is go through his to-do list to distract his mind: set up alias ID docs, check; change plates at the border, check; dispose of all Gibraltar-related materials and hardware...

He still has his phone. Jutting his jaw, he opens it deep in his lap and starts transferring the essentials to a secure cloud. When he reaches the photos, a mindless sort of indulgence leaks over him. He flicks through them, fat-thumbing the lot. The party by the mess. Drinking with Hanzo. Beachtime with Lúcio. Weapons prep with Hanzo on the cliffs. On the Orca with Lena. Breakfast hangovers with Hana. Drinking with Hanzo. Training with Hanzo. Hanzo on the cliff, backlit by a tangerine sunset.

A bug whines through his chest and settles in his throat. It sinks its stinger into the gunslinger's esophagus until even breathing feels parasitic. Every image that used to make him sigh with longing now makes his jaw grind in its hinges.

Fuck it , is all he thinks as he hits Select-All, finds the archer's number, and sends him the bulk in one go.

Then he discretely holds the phone at his side and crushes it in his metal fist. He finishes his whiskey, catches the waitress, and then politely hands off the ball of twisted metal as he asks for another. "And some chips with salsa, if you'd be so kind, darlin'."

Then a different apparition altogether comes through the front door. Pike Le May: looking thinner but stepping harder. Still wearing the same vest with the frayed edges, with a few new pins to join the others. He sees Cole immediately, as if he'd seen him through the glass door and hadn't moved his eyes since. Cole rises when he comes. He slaps his old boss twice on the shoulder but Pike doesn't manage more than a gruff recitation of Cole's real name before falling into the chair like the walk from his bike to the table was a veritable Oregon Trail.

“It’s Cole, Pike. Name’s Cole Cassidy. Remember?”

Pike grunts; he remembers. Cole sees the same hardness in those strange, felt-green eyes, watered down from years of pollution both internal and ex. He matches it, feels himself morph into someone Pike can tolerate, even listen to. He feels his skin shift, like a desert lizard, as he mirrors the old man’s stoic slump and unconcerned air. Like he's reverting back to how he was before Reyes sold him a new self. But without the youthful charm; already the gunslinger can feel the weight of age catch up to the weight of his deeds, darkening his frown and adding a not-unappreciated swagger to what used to be a high-throttle jump.

“Lorna must be treating you right. Haven’t seen you this slim since that year you gave up dairy.”

“Now she’s at me about my goddamn cholesterol.” Pike takes some of Cole’s chips, covering the perimeter with a metric ton of salsa. “I told her, you get them moles removed and I’ll start giving a damn about my goddamn cholesterol.”

“She must’ve liked that.”

“Said, ‘Just for that, I’m growin’ ten more moles.’” Pike smiles with the most warmth Cole has seen on his heavily-lined face in maybe thirty years: reserved for the only person who could make him do anything, including smile.

It was probably Lorna that convinced Pike to answer Cole’s request in the first place. Lorna or Yolanda.

“How you doing, Cole? You got a woman looking after you yet?”

“Nah,” Cole lifts his whiskey, chuckles, “Think anyone who decided to shack up with me would be the one needin’ looking-after.” He drinks.

“Just need to find someone who rides like you do. And stop chasing after tail that’s way out of your league. You still doin’ that?”

Cole finishes the whiskey in one smooth gulp. It burns, but he doesn’t let his voice get raspy. “Places I been riding lately… brought me deeper trouble than usual.” He tries to get the waitress’s attention.

Pike props his elbows up on the table and folds his hands, rests his handlebar mustache on his fingers. There’s no hair left on his forearms and the old Deadlock tattoo has faded to a blur, worse than his prison ink. He turns a cloudy gaze towards the kitchen, likely at the cooks, who laugh and carry on like the happiest gang in the world. “You were born unto trouble, boy.”

Go easy, Cole Cassidy. Goin’ off too hot and sudden is what usually ends up gettin’ you.

“What’s the crew like these days, Pike?”

“Why? You thinking of coming back?”

Pike waits for an answer the way a man might ask a prisoner to walk the plank. But Cole's played this game before, knows it's best to let the quiet speak for him. Men like Pike will always fill the silence with whatever their stubborn mind has already decided.

When the waitress approaches again, Cole gives her an honest smile and holds out his empty glass.

"Another one, darlin', if you please."

"Double margarita," Pike grunts. "Hold the salt, please and thank you."

She takes the tension with her. Pike settles in his chair with a deep, rough sigh; holding a grudge makes one weary enough without old age already gumming up the works. Cole can't help but think about Jack. How quickly he'd aged. How Gabe, who aged like fine wine, used to tease him about it. He remembers the first day he saw a bottle of amber in Jack's office.

Then Pike lowers his voice to the level of asphalt, shaking Cole back to the present. "Gang ain't what it used to be, Cole. Time's I think it's a goddamn shit-show. Bigger, bossier. Young guys with no cred comin' in and runnin' it like goddamn Mafioso. Business goes so fast, we had to take on a dozen more omnics just to keep up. I'll get to work in the morning and see boosted swag on the floor from companies I'd only just learned about on the evening news the night before. You weren't right to leave, boy, but you sure left at the right time."

"Wasn't too far away."

"Distance weren't the problem." Pike licks his teeth behind his lips with his sorry gaze on the table. "Was sorry to hear about him, by the way. Though, can't say I was surprised."

Cole narrows his eyes. He can so easily go back to that barstool in Chattanooga. This place almost has the same smell, the same sounds. Similar features, like those tiny square windows. He can look up at the scratchy holovids above the bottles and graft his own scene over the banal local news: smoke, fire, wreckage. A glass of well whiskey frozen in his hand. Some reporter relaying the names of the dead like she was reading off a roster of Cole's whole family.

Pike wipes his mouth with Cole's napkin. "Reyes was a real son-of-a-bitch, but he was a real one."

"'Spose that's true."

"You don't look too broken up about it."

"Well," Cole waves his hand, puts on an apathetic smile, leans back like a jester in the king's velvet throne. "Been collectin' ghosts since I was a kid. Mama used to keep her shrine in a coat closet -- I keep mine up here." He taps his metal finger to his temple. "More's the merrier."

Pike grunts, this time conciliatory.

Cole glances to the biker group on his right. “You ain’t heard anything from any of his old contacts, have you?”

“Whose?”

“Reyes.”

Pike leans forward, goes quiet, “As in, Blackwatch boys?”

“Yeah.”

“Matter of fact, I have.” He leans back again, creaks his chair.

Again, Cole makes himself wait. He can feel his nerves jump into that jittery left hand, just like when he was a kid. He’ll have to get the wires checked again; one whole arm later, and he still can’t keep it from twitching.

“One of ’em came through ‘bout a month ago.” Pike crosses his arms over a still-round belly, speaks in the rushed mumbling of a passive-aggressive spouse with a bone to pick. “Reminisced about the good old days, which I ‘spose to her meant when Blackwatch would pop in now and then for an ‘inspection’ and end up leaving with a few cases shipped to God-knows-where so y’all could stockpile without it showin’ up on Overwatch receipts.”

This is where Cole inserts a short chuckle, lowers his head. As if it’s his fault. As if everything Blackwatch ever did was his fault.

“She asked how I was, how m’family was -- usual BS. Wondered if I’d consider selling stock to a new client. Couldn’t say shit about them. Wouldn’t even give me a name.”

Cole nods. “So.”

“So, we said, fuck off Kylie or whatever-the-fuck-your-name is, just ‘cause I dealt with your old boss don’t mean I gotta deal with you. Didn’t seem too broken up about it, to be honest. Like she was just goin’ on an errand -- that pissed me off, too. People used to be a little more damn respectful in the old days. We’d just won a goddamn war. Kept the people fed.”

“Fed and dead.”

“That’s real cute, Cole. Fed *you* well enough. You didn’t mind the ‘dead’ part so much in those days, neither.”

Pike drinks up his margarita as soon as the waitress sets it down and immediately orders another. Cole takes his whiskey with his metal hand and toasts it to her, both exchanging smiles and blushes. That gleaming black hair keeps catching his eye, distracting his purpose. Always swayed by a pretty face.

The old man’s eyes fall to the skull’s hollow ones. “How’d you lose the arm?”

“Gas station fire.” Cole holds the glass up to his lips and tips down half. “Some fool doused the whole rack. One strong breeze, lit cigar -- *fwoosh.”*

Pike chuckles, strokes his handlebars. Cole can tell he doesn't believe him. Old man always did have an eye for the authentic. It served him well in arms deals and good marriages, but also utilized kind lies in both, and that's what he gives Cole now. Buys his bluff.

"Could've been worse, I suppose. Looks like a decent piece."

"Damn straight. You wouldn't believe how good this thing is at scratchin' my balls."

Pike laughs again, more convincingly this time. Cole smiles. Despite the underhanded nature of their meeting and Pike's general bad attitude, it's good being back with the old pirate. He seems softer somehow; maybe his grandkids, maybe old age. Though that sort of thing never seemed to alter Gabe nor Jack any. Maybe it's just the margarita. Tequila makes old men personable.

And too personal. "You ever see her again?"

Cole doesn't look up. He chases his thumb across his glass's edge. "Who's that?"

"That dark-haired lady. One with the kid."

Still doesn't look up. "She died."

"Shit. When?"

"Before the explosion. Not long before."

"Shit."

"Mhm."

"Sorry."

Cole can't seem to move his eyes from anywhere but the circling pool of brown liquid he's been seemingly staring into ever since it happened. He looks through it like the scope of a long rifle nightmarishly pointed back to his own dead eye. It wouldn't be hard to trace his life since that day by glasses; if he kept a stable home, he might have a bookcase full of them.

It wasn't often that he felt sunken in like that after someone mentioned Ana; somewhere along the line, he'd learned to hear her name and keep his head above water. Yet somehow, out of Pike's mouth -- Pike, who's known Cole longer than anyone else living -- it feels like taking a bullet.

He finishes his drink. "Is what it is."

"Bianca passed, too." Pike shakes his head. "Never did tell Lorna about her. But she was a good one, even with the kid. Somethin' about those single-moms-in-the-gang, I swear. Like they could save the whole damn world and you too and never lose a st—"

"What was the rest of the gal's name, Pike?"

“Who?”

“Former agent who came to visit. Kylie-whatever-the-fuck.”

“Oh. Wasn’t Kylie. It was… Riley. Riley... J-somethin’... *Jacob.”*

“Riley Jacobs.” Cole leans back in his chair. “I remember her. Kinda sleepy-lookin’ gal? Smooth-talker? Blonde hair?”

“That's the one.”

Cole squints -- Riley Jacobs was a junior agent: field tech and diplomacy. Gabe didn't like her much. They debated often, though never spoke if they didn't have to. She wouldn't even know the combat maneuvers Cole had seen in Siberia, let alone how to teach them. “And she didn’t say nothing else? What kinda order she was looking to fill?”

Pike slowly sets his margarita down. He swipes the salt and licks it off his broken nail. “You on a dog hunt, cowboy?”

“Tying up loose ends.”

Pike crushes his eyes with those wiry brows and mumbles a low *mhm* . “Blackwatch ends?”

Cole frowns. “Keep your voice down, old man.”

“You don’t tell me what to do, boy. And you got nothin’ to worry about. There’s no one in this bar who’d be involved in anything even a little like Blackwatch.”

“Like Deadlock was?”

Pike hammers his fist on the table and leans in, short and jerky, like he was going to take a bite out of Cole’s nose but then thought, *you don’t know where that’s been* . Cole doesn’t move a hair, but feels eyes swivel in from every direction -- although, maybe that’s just his nerves talking. The music’s pretty loud, and even though it’s still early in the afternoon, the drinks have been pouring steady. None of these regulars should be startled by the outbursts of angry men. This is a place built by angry men.

“We already had our fight, Cole. You remember? Galveston? What was it, three months after you’d left Blackwatch? Using another one of your shit-for-brains’ aliases, wearing some god-awful disguise. Asking me to forgive you for leaving, saying you had no choice. Like I never went to prison to protect my own? Like I’d never have gone to protect *you?”* Pike leans back, but his voice stays leaden. He’s squeezed his own lime as well as Cole’s into the watery remains of his drink, but his fingers keep grasping. He squeezes until the rind turns to pulp. “But you were too hot-shit. Too hot to sit still, especially behind bars. Your claustrophobic ass wouldn’t’a lasted two weeks. You’d’a dead-eyed your own brains out.”

Cole stares across the table, eyes squinted down to nothing. *Take it for the team, cowboy.* "Probably."

“But Reyes kept Overwatch off our backs and all he asked for were a couple well-payin’ deals once in a blue moon. I could look at my kids’ college educations and weigh that against losin’ one ornery bastard way back when. So I just gave y’a couple black eyes and considered us square. But don’t you think for one second that I’m helpin’ you turn your back on more of your former brothers. Don’t care who they are. Don’t care what they done. You might’a lost every goddamn principle I ever tried to teach you, but I sure as hell didn’t.”

Now the metal hand stops twitching. Despite the anxiety, despite the burning rush that keeps him out of chairs and out of doors and all over the world, Cole is as still as a stone when he thinks he might have to shoot. The pressure builds behind his eye instead.

But all he winds up reaching for is his box of cigarillos. “You oughta learn to let go, boss,” he drawls. “Or Lorna’s gonna be on you about your blood pressure, too.” He nudges a smoke between his lips and offers the rest to Pike.

The old man sighs through his nostrils. Cole thinks of how Hanzo used to do that -- like a tired, disdainful dragon. Briefly, reluctantly, he wonders what the archer’s doing right now.

“I quit smoking.”

Cole leans back, pockets the box. “I’m trying to make up for it, Pike. I’m taking responsibility. You taught me that,” he mumbles, trying to sway the conversation back in his favor. “Can’t trust the authorities or anyone else to take care of you and yours. Gotta do it yourself. I’m trying to do right by my team.”

“You always used to say that. ‘Tryin’a do right.’ How’s that worked out for ya? How you gonna do right when you’re as bad as anything that lives?”

Cole locks his jaw, lets his eyes roam, searches for answers under the twisted posters and roach-motel decor. The music switches to bluegrass, some ancient song about Cockaigne -- the imaginary paradise of the downtrodden. He thinks of the first time he held a gun, how the sound and the power and the six shattered glass bottles left him in tears. He had no idea how he’d hit every single one. Had no idea why his chest got so hot, why an eagle’s cry circulated the static of his brain like a canyon as empty as the space between stars. Pike took his shoulder, the only one unafraid, the only one who’d said anything at all -- and he said that it’d be okay if he never touched a pistol again. But Cole came back to the range two days later and hasn’t cried since. If anything, it’s the opposite: a firefight a day keeps the waterworks away. That’s one that might’ve made Ana laugh.

His roaming eyes catch a familiar sight. The four bikers at the bar are huddled around the shortest one, who’s leaned over and speaking loudly to the female bartender. The bartender’s dancing that dance Cole has seen so many times before: half playing along because it’s her job, half trying to give them the slip because she’s uncomfortable.

“Maybe most people are too good-natured to recognize bad when they see it.” Cole scratches his beard. “To do somethin’ about it. Maybe the world needs someone bad to deal with the worse.”

Pike eyes his metal arm. “Y’got enough bullet holes in you to prove you ain’t the right man for that job, Cole.”

Cole stands up. “Ain’t dead yet.”

Pike stands too, defensively. “What’re you --”

The man at the bar goes for the bartender’s arm. Her high note of danger and surprise goes off just as Cole’s hand slaps on the biker’s shoulder.

“What the --?”

Cole yanks him up off his stool, as if levitated, and shoves him away so hard that he hits Pike’s table and knocks the whole thing over. He cries out, sputters, struggling to keep his footing on beer-slippery boots. Behind Cole, his buddies immediately hop from the counter and reach for whatever they got: illegal switchblades and stout American handguns, by the sound. Other patrons startle, but don’t rush out just yet. From the look of the place, this is just another Saturday night. Probably part of the charm. Probably a review on the internet outlining just how entertaining the fights are alongside descriptions of the quesadillas. The waitresses, however, are booking it out the door.

The leader recovers with a wobble, but quickly. “Son of a bitch!”

Cole gestures to the door, Peacekeeper heavy under the serape. “Maybe take your crew elsewhere, partner. Ain’t no call to start a ruckus.”

The knife comes out. “Fuck off, man. I'll make you bleed out right here.”

“That a fact.”

“You have no idea who you’re messin’ with. This is Emperor territory.”

“The Emperors?” Cole lets out a barking laugh. “Didn’t you guys shoot up that transport a month ago? Alrighty,” he shakes his head, throws his serape over his shoulder and squares up. “Now I think I can get into this.”

“Don’t kill ‘em, Cole,” Pike drawls from behind the leader. “You know their mama’s don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Mind yourself, old man.”

One of the blades behind Cole comes for his kidneys. He moves right, snatches the man’s arm with his metal hand and twists -- a crunch and a sharp cry. Now people are starting to leave; nothing like the sound of breaking bone to empty seats.

The knife clatters to the ground. He whirls him into the leader and drops just as another knife swipes for the back of his head -- good thing his hat is elsewhere, or he’d be in the market for a new one. He uppercuts, shoves him, raises his left to block and take a swinging pistol. There’s the option of punching with it, but he thinks he might’ve already ruined the other guy’s wrist; he’s still wailing. Fighting with his metal hand ends things quickly, but the

aftermath is always bloody. More bloody than necessary. Best to raise the left up and keep it there, like a knight's shield. Something a little more white-hat. It doesn't come natural.

"Fuck him up!"

More gangsters pop up from tables and blow out from back rooms and suddenly Cole is twelve-or-more-to-one, with pistols in the mix. *Real messy.*

A couple men swing for the gunslinger at the same time; he trips the first and throws the second over the bar, straight through the kitchen window and into a vat of *mole* . Dimly he hears cooks yelling, *'Vamos, vamos!'* as he smashes a bottle into the third man's temple. All is the sound of scuffling boots, hoarse cries and breaking glass. Out of the corner of his eye, Cole sees Pike snatch a shotgun from someone's hands and knock him over the head with it. No one wants to pull a trigger, but that eventuality is winding up fast as they get a better idea of who (or what) they're dealing with: hell on wheels, or something close. Cole wields a stool into a man's face like he's swinging a feather duster, blocks with his right and punches another hard enough to knock over two more. He's lost count of how many men he's hit by the time he traps a shooter's arm and feels the pistol go off against his forearm, creating a wicked scorch mark straight across the skull's hollow eyes.

Now the clock is ticking. Cole looks around for Pike, sees him already by the entrance with a call that's muted by the god-awful din. Cole excuses himself, sweeps up his hat as he fells a few more, and dashes for the street. The door slams shut, he crushes the lock, and together they haul ass up the lonely sunset highway. It takes four sharp turns and several random Exit's for the smile to bleed from Cole's face.

They don't stop riding until the city lights are behind them and the wide open desert lay ahead. The sun sets to Cole's left, hot-red with streaks of gold. Like something he remembered outside the diner, when the red streaked across the slatted chrome like tangible spears of ruby. Like his eye when the eagle cries.

He sighs, wishing he could take a picture. He'll have to pick up a new phone soon.

Pike is ahead on his bike, signals with his arm to a gas station. No one there to disturb them but the holovids above the gas pumps and a chorus of crickets in the timothy beyond. A sliver of a moon burns as bright as the fluorescents, highlighting the real age on Pike's face and the drying blood on Cole's knuckles.

He offers a cigarillo, and this time the old man accepts.

Pike inhales like an old pro. "Dorado?"

He shakes his head. "Tangiers."

"Hah." Pike exhales a thick cloud, holds the cigarillo like it's a glass of brandy. "Yolanda asked about you."

Cole snaps shut his lighter. "Pike, goddamnit. Told you not to tell anyone you was seeing me."

“She saw the call ID. And she’s smart as a whip, can’t hide nothin’ from her.”

Smoke falls from the gunslinger, shaking with his head. “How is she?”

“Doing real well. Legal clerk now. Got a place down on Melrose. Got real agitated when she saw you called. Couldn’t barely understand her, she was signin’ so fast. ”

Cole lowers his head. “Used to feel like we were a lot alike.”

“Well… I think she thought so, too. Never wanted you to go off and kill like the rest of ‘em. Wanted you home with a baby on your back and a beer belly on your front.”

Cole scoff-laughs, lowers his head. Laughs longer than he should. When he picks up his eyes to the last stretch of sunset, those eyes are shining, but his grin is twisted. Pike does him the courtesy of not looking. Buys his bluff.

The gunslinger puts his hand in his back pocket, feels the sheen of a golden silk scarf between his fingers. He hasn’t rid himself of Gibraltar yet. He could dump it now. There are trash cans everywhere.

Then the holovids above each gas pump suddenly switch to the same channel.

“This just in from our station in New Mexico -- outlaw Cole Cassidy has been spotted north of Roswell, New Mexico, involved with an altercation at a local cafe, a known gang hang-out which --”

“Well, stay safe out there, Cole,” Pike says, turning away.

Cole turns at the same time, pushing the scarf deeper into his pocket. *Fuck it.*

Then he turns back suddenly. “Pike. Anything else that Riley Jacob might’ve been after? Why she might show up right then, right there? Anything special come in?”

Pike hardly moves to turn around, but Cole can see his alien green eyes resting on the gravel dust. Cole imagines he’s about to shrug and shove off, but then: “Miguel’d just gotten somethin’ he was excited about. LumériCo stuff -- maybe six crates. Hardly bigger’n cat carriers. Don’t know what it was, ‘cause I didn’t ask.” He takes another drag off the cigarillo, then tosses it into the grass patch. “Be careful, cowboy. Nothin’s the same as it used to be.”

"Yeup." Cole heads for his truck. "You watch out too, old man. People who sent Riley aren't the kind to face you down on an open road. Sooner burn you from the sky."

He doesn't hear a response, just slides into his truck and takes off south. Riley Jacob’s folks lived in El Paso way back when -- he’d always see lavish Christmas cards from them every year, dutifully magnetized to the cafeteria wall. He’d wager they’re still there, but he’ll follow the trail regardless.

The country station turns all the way up and Cole hums along to the new hit: *you can get good at anything, especially moving on* . Then he slides the truck into fifth and races east, towards the moon-lined edges of a black, skull-shaped thunderhead.

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Another rattling plane in a black, icy storm. The pilot who agreed to drop Hanzo and Cole into eastern New York failed to mention the weather, as well as the flammable cargo. Barrel upon sloshing barrel pack the innards of the large-scale cruiser alongside the gunslinger and the assassin, boxing them in like a threatening mob. Only aircraft this large and this well-armored are permitted to fly over New York airspace these days, and for good reason -- they provide materials to the nuclear plants north of the metropolis and are therefore protected by government missile silos. They won't waste good munitions on anything less.

Cole finds that he rather enjoys the gasoline-like burn in the cramped hanger. It reminds him of the Deadlock garage: grease and diesel and singed rubber. It must hold no deeper meaning for Hanzo, because the archer's wrinkled nose has been a constant from western Spain to US airspace.

The only conversation happens when they're first buckling in, and is very short.

"So what've you been doing all this time, Shimada?"

"Drinking." Then, after a significant pause: "and you?"

"Same."

And not a word since.

Cole thinks of the flight back from Russia, sipping whiskey in the Orca, whiling away the post-Caduceus torpor by imagining the archer at his side. Nothing about this flight is what he'd dreamed. He glances over at Hanzo's still hands on the tops of his thighs. Knuckly, calloused fingers, immaculate skin that belies their trained purpose. Hands he once dreamed of holding, interlacing, bringing to his lips as the first step in a long, detailed agenda upon the rest of the archer's body. Cole sighs and, a moment later, hears Hanzo echo the same deep sound.

Then the pilot's voice jolts him back to the present. "Alrighty boys, this here's your stop. Now don't go telling anyone you ever heard my name, nor take the time to describe my face. What I'm doing is for the gosh-darn greater good, and that's something you can put your hand over. All you can hope to achieve by even trying to sell out my identity is the

knowledge that you've potentially compromised a tight network of governmental trade of resources, and I'm telling you right now, Uncle Sam won't thank you for that."

Cole looks over at Hanzo, who's glowering at the barrels as if considering the possible benefits of a lit match. "Shouldn't be too concerned there, partner," the cowboy drawls, adjusting himself. "My associate here is a man of few words by nature, and I frankly can't recall your name to begin with."

"Ha! Well, alrighty then. You two jokers secure your headsets in the netting and make your way to the aft doors. You got ten minutes before I give the green-light, then I want you out in eight seconds or less! Miss your window, and you're liable to end up as a new fixture on someone's apartment balcony. Or a hole in the gosh-darn ocean!"

Hanzo seems glad to stand, glad to tug off his headset and shove it behind the netting where his back had just been reclining. Cole watches him as they shake under the intense vibration, holding fast to the bulkhead straps as they make their ways for the bay doors. Most agents Cole used to work with had a grim resolve about jumping out of aircraft (if they had resolve at all), but the archer seems downright calm. Cole's a little put off until he remembers how many times he's watched Hanzo fly through the air from unimaginable heights. He'd seen him leap between rooftops like he was walking across a street. He'd seen him fall from eight stories without so much as a bruise. He'd once seen him jump clear off a cliff, making Cole race to the edge just to see the archer hanging from the sheer side, laughing his drunken head off.

The gunslinger clenches his jaw, chases out warm memories for what feels like the tenth time since climbing aboard the aircraft. He grips the wall straps behind Hanzo as they make their way to the bay doors, where they wait on either side, hanging on as the plane dips below the storm layer and hits harsh winter turbulence.

"Thirty seconds!" cracks the pilot's voice.

Cole feels a tap and looks up. There's no way either of them can hear a thing under that din, but he can make out Hanzo's smirk well enough, devilish in the flashing red light. The archer gestures to his own chest and makes the sign of the cross, something he's seen Cole do a dozen times.

It's enough to make the gunslinger glare at the icy black through the bulkhead window. At least he knows he's not the only one being harassed with fond memories.

Don't mind, cowboy. Keep your head in the game and your eye on that yakuza .

The light flashes green and the doors open. The wind is painfully cold, even through Cole's multiple layers, but it barely registers. His adrenaline works fast, just like his eye. He lifts the lower part of his thermal mask, pulls it tight, then nods to Hanzo, who jumps first.

The plane's roar vanishes beneath the yawning howl as they plummet to the earth.

A bitter wind rushes through the war-torn remains of the international airport. Hanzo and Cole break down their parachutes and assemble their gear on the barren runway under the shelter of a half-decimated terminal. In the frosted dark, Cole can't see more than twenty feet in either direction, but he can just make out the skeleton of what used to be the ATC tower -- like a blackened lighthouse for the damned. He's horrified to see so little of the place still intact, but then, he expected as much. The naval attacks during the Crisis hit New York hard. What wasn't obliterated by massive omnics was washed away by floods and other natural disasters. Whole strips of land no longer exist -- just hilly sandbars where once were entire islands. But he tells himself that, maybe, he just can't see well enough through the blizzard to spot more remains. Perhaps there's more beyond that dense veil of frost.

Within minutes, Hanzo's signing the go-ahead and they're heading west towards the city. The archer assumes the lead and the gunslinger is more than happy to let him. Easier to keep that knife out of his back.

Two knives , he reminds himself.

The walk is difficult. Roads this far east are no longer maintained if they exist at all, and Hanzo sets a grueling pace. At one point he stops on the hood of a dilapidated car and actually waits for Cole to catch up, his night-vision mask still and impassive through the black air. The gunslinger doubles his efforts from then on, ignores the huffing and puffing inside his own face-wrap, determined to show no weakness.

As they pass what used to be a massive horse track, Cole decides to take a gamble. He dons the desert-lizard skin again and half-shouts: "you ever been here before, Shimada?"

Hanzo looks over his shoulder. Between all the gear and icy wind, his expression is clear only in the lofty rasp of his voice. "What?"

"New York City. Ever been?"

He grunts and faces forward once more. "Are we to make small talk right now?"

"Fine with me if you wanna keep truckin' on in silence," Cole drawls, "But it just might put the cold off our minds. Besides," he raises his voice, high and teasing, "Thought you said you 'missed me.' Was it just my pretty face?"

"Time and place," Hanzo replies, harsh as the air. "Now we must focus on our objective, and avoiding any hostiles."

"What kinda hostiles? No one in their right mind would walk out into this mess."

He feels Hanzo catching his breath as he struggles past a particularly deep snow drift, created by the nestling of vehicle corpses and housing debris. "There are several analogous events

that commonly occur in urbanized locales after human beings have vacated. Nature moves in. Not just plants, but animals: wild dogs, cats, escaped zoo creatures..."

"Now you're just making shit up."

"It happened in San Diego during the Crisis."

"Huh. Must've missed that story."

"There is also the chance that the locals who are *not* in their right mind will attempt to ambush wanderers in this storm. Our equipment and weapons would serve them well in these conditions. I would rather not have to kill anyone before I have had a chance to get warm."

"Prob'ly right."

"I am. And you, gunslinger?" Now Hanzo is looking over his shoulder. Cole can tell he's smiling from his tone. "When were you last here?"

Cole swallows against building phlegm. He didn't want Hanzo that familiar. Like the crossing gesture on the plane; he feels uncomfortable standing so close. "Can't rightly say."

"Then wrongly say."

A terse grunt. "Maybe fourteen, thirteen years ago? Some Blackwatch job."

"Anything interesting?"

"Can't remember. Hardly had a moment to sit for a smoke in those days."

"Is that why you learned to smoke while you shoot?"

Cole affects a sarcastic laugh. "Blackwatch jobs were always like that. Tended to be that one would bleed into the other, so to speak." He pauses, then decides to march on. *If I open up, maybe he will, too.* "Reyes always had too many irons in too many fires. Genji and I were real busy towards the end. Wasn't like we ever talked about what was goin' on, neither."

"You operated in secrecy. Blackwatch did."

"We kept our cards close, yeah."

"And your Commander Morrison had no problem with this?"

Cole barks out a laugh. "Morrison just had breakfast."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Breakfast. Most important meal of the day? Morrison had a real strict ritual about it. Think it was somethin' he picked up from the military. Or maybe his old football days. It was coffee and correspondence first, always at his desk. Then five eggs, usually hard-boiled, with buttered toast. OJ. Sometimes mango juice –- Gabe turned him onto it." Cole smiles under

his mask, like he's talking about an old school buddy. "Through the military, SEP, Overwatch... the breakfast stayed the same. He just got to adding more eggs.

"Then he added a new feature to the ritual: Gabe-Watch. Every morning, check if something had come out about something Gabe had done but was too busy or too tight-lipped or too whatever to tell him about. After a while, I guess, it started taking over. Jack had less and less time in the morning. Too many responsibilities. Too many articles. Not enough eggs."

"And how is this related to my question?"

"He didn't have a problem with it." Cole yanks his pack further up his shoulder. "It was just his problem."

He hears Hanzo hum -- an indication of having heard, nothing more.

Then, with amusement: "is that why you brought me so many eggs on my first day on the rock?"

Cole chews his cheek. The sun of Gibraltar can't hope to pierce this biting frost -- he won't let it. "How 'bout answering my question first, archer? Clan ever send you to NYC or what?"

"I went once, when I was young. Not clan business."

"Guess they wouldn't have much to do with a broken down city."

"Correct. And after this mission, I never will never visit again."

"Why's that? Don't like it so far?"

Hanzo snorts, his eyes lingering on a small park to their left. Cole's gaze follows. He sees the beheaded statue of a stone angel, her former likeness replicated with a crude sculpture of traffic signs, barbed wire and torn-up fencing. Spray-painted blocks of concrete. Icicles forming on daggers of glass. The message is clear: there are no guardians here.

"I like order."

Cole clenches his jaw to keep from voicing his reply: *yeah, we all know what you'd do to keep order.*

Despite the harsh conditions, they find little trouble in locating a suitable spot to hole up for the night. After miles of devastation, a clear-cut avenue signals the start of what might be called civilization. The shoulder-to-shoulder houses still look weak and unoccupied, and trash and debris still pile up on certain corners, but it's no longer akin to traversing a post-apocalyptic war-zone. A little more like a dilapidated campsite; messy, not dirty. Chaos as opposed to contamination.

Cole can see more than a few lights on as they approach a row of houses lining the edge of a large park. Hanzo points a well-padded finger to a paneled two-story on the corner, where the front entrance is blocked by wooden boards and piles of trash. There'll be no occupants; Cole gives him a thumbs-up.

They move quickly. Hanzo goes first, securing his hook on the hinge of a second-story window and grappling up the icy facade as fast as if he were jogging down the street. Cole grabs the same rope and follows a bit more slowly so he can case up and down the street. It's impossible to see very far in the frosted shroud, but his gut tells him they weren't followed. If they were, well -- Cole'd feel sorry for anyone unlucky enough to follow Hanzo down his burrow.

Slipping inside is difficult. Both men have to shove their not-so-small bodies in between old chest-of-drawers, three-legged tables and broken bed frames just to get to a door. It seems like every piece of furniture in the house has been packed into this single room; a desperate gesture from the previous occupants, Cole says. Trying to save their things from the floods. Thinking they might come back later. On a few surfaces, family frames and seemingly pointless baubles sit frozen, still waiting.

“What is that smell,” Hanzo mutters.

Cole rapid-sniffs the air, like a hound. “Mold. And birds, I reckon. Old churches back home used to get like that, after they closed down. Lots of nooks and crannies for pigeons n’such.”

“Hn.” A pause as they shuffle past the debris, and then, softly: “they used to infest the rafters of the family shrine as well. Though we had a much bigger problem with sparrows.”

“Sparrows?”

“The shrine, the trees… they were everywhere.” He heads out of the room and into the hall. “I used to find their clutches under roof tiles.”

Cole follows. “And?”

Hanzo glances over his shoulder. “Are you asking if I had them destroyed?”

“You’re the one said they were a problem.”

The archer renders an expression of derision, then keeps walking. “No point. More would have just taken their place.”

Not quite enjoying that answer, Cole lets Hanzo take over searching the top floor and heads downstairs. He keeps Peacekeeper drawn but finds nothing to shoot in the stairwell, save for a couple cockroaches that look like they could take a bullet and live to tell the tale. He checks for more vermin, finds a few old droppings but guesses it’s old – there’s nothing here to keep a hungry mouth coming back. The few pests he does see scuttle out of sight as soon as he lights his heat-lamp. Warm pulses emanate from the base; soon the entire living room is warm enough for him to remove his gloves, hat and jacket. The stores are empty, the windows are heavily fortified with nailed-on wood (“Thankfully,” Hanzo mutters as he

wanders downstairs,) and the two other rooms are inconsequential: a bathroom full of broken glass, a larger one half-full of boxes.

The lamp heat makes the room stuffy and dry instantaneously, like the atmosphere inside a commercial jet. Boxed in with a radiator. Not that Cole's complaining -- he'll take too-hot over too-cold any day, and the small room quickly starts to feel closer to a cabin with a hearth. He unrolls his cot, takes a swig of water from his canteen and starts relieving himself of all but his dry black undersuit.

Hanzo removes his gear must more slowly, as if he aches, and folds it neatly in the corner by the fireplace. Distracted by his own fastidiousness, Cole is able to observe him freely. He can't tell if it's musculature or just posture, but something looks weaker about the archer. In Gibraltar, Hanzo could've thrown Cole over his shoulder and tossed him across a room like a sack of potatoes -- he's pretty sure that actually happened, actually, after they were both a few bottles under. Now he seems relieved to lower his backpack to the floor, eager to rub his trapezius muscles. Again, Cole can't help but think: *he's seen some shit.*

He also can't help but add: *good.*

But he still has to look away when Hanzo turns towards the light. The golden sheen against his gaunt cheekbones and dark under-eyes makes his face look even more handsome, even more dramatic. That itch comes back like it's been mere seconds between now and the time when Cole would stare at Hanzo on the tarmac, high-chinned and stunning in the Mediterranean wind. Even now, pale as the snow, with more ribs visible than not, the archer still looks like all the warmth the gunslinger could ever need, even if the blizzard trapped them in this dank hidey-hole for weeks.

He frowns and brutishly re-focuses on the task of setting up his space, forcefully reminding himself that he is all-too-often swayed by a pretty face. Or a sweet-smelling liquor, or a good smoke. Or a race down the freeway with nothing but a strip of metal between his legs and the law on his heels. Too much torque and a rough road equals whiplash, and his neck's still sore.

As he unrolls his cot, he thinks of Gabe. His old commander stunned him, too, first time they met. Even with his wrists burning inside cuffs and the bruise from the man's shotgun still swelling on his cheek, Cole'd been more than a little awed. Reyes, *el jefe;* a living legend amongst living legends. After years of mentorship and brotherhood, of course he'd raised him up on a pedestal too high to survive the fall.

You ain't never gonna learn . His mama's voice comes back to him through the dark, yet he sees Ana's face.

Then Hanzo's voice rattles him back to reality. "I will scout the area."

The cowboy turns his head. "You sure? Gotta be twenty below by now."

"We must move quickly to learn as much as possible before initiating our approach." Hanzo removes his jacket, exposing the black undersuit. His quiver and pack go back over it, secured with a strap dotted with pins. Cole recognizes the flag of Japan and two circling

dragons, the latter making him narrow his eyes. Did he find a Shimada pin during his travels? Is he seriously repping the clan, after everything?

It's enough to make Cole give Hanzo his back, throwing himself into weapon maintenance.

“And I do not sleep very much these days. The exercise will help.”

Cole grunts, trying to sound indifferent and succeeding. “Didn’t figure you for the scouting type.”

“The original *shinobi* were primarily scouts and spies.”

“Didn’t start killin’ until later then?”

Hanzo pauses. He seems to sense hostility, but maintains his lofty manner anyway. “We wore many hats, as *you* might say.”

Cole looks away, huffs; leave it to Hanzo to hint at intimacy even through all that natural superiority. It shouldn't warm Cole as much as it does, but he manages to stay mad anyway.

"Where is it, by the way?”

“Where’s what?”

“Your hat.”

“S’in my bag. What’s it to you?”

“You are never without it, are you?”

“Alright,” Cole abandons his bullets and turns, standing. “Quit it.”

“Quit what?”

“Bringing up the past like any of it matters now." He waves at all of Hanzo. "I know your game. Don’t get familiar.”

“We *are* familiar. Which I believe,” Hanzo mimes tipping a cowboy hat, playfully, arrogantly, making Cole burn, *“You* started.”

“Well. I didn’t have the whole story back then.” Cole returns to his gear, takes Peacekeeper and gives his back again. “Just ran in, guns a’blazin’. Ain't the first time it's bit me in the ass.”

“And you have the whole story now, you think?”

Cole growls without looking up, “I got enough.”

Hanzo pauses, but his voice doesn’t come out any weaker. If anything, he sounds clearer than Cole has ever known him to be. “Then I am to be the villain in this story you’ve constructed in my absence. Despite your… former inclinations.”

As if he were more concerned with his cot than whatever Hanzo says or does: “that’s right.”

Another pause. “Very well.” Assured steps towards the stairs. “Since I am scouting the area, perhaps you should wipe our power cells. They will need reconfiguration in this weather. And you should set up a sensor perimeter around this house so we are not surprised in the night. And make sure the ear pieces are working properly for tomorrow.”

“It’s a one-night camp, Hanzo. Ain’t gotta be perfect. Just gotta be right.”

“Yes, well. You can do everything right and still wind up ruining your life.”

Then Cole turns his whole head to stare in ludicrous awe as Hanzo ascends the decaying staircase as if it were set inside his own palace.

Then he shakes his head, grumbles angry nonsense to himself, and tries to wrangle the swelling warmth in his guts into a more manageable shape.

The sound of the archer descending never comes; he leaves so silently, Cole is left to wondering if he left at all. He’s not the kind to worry, to turn in his bed long after he’s shut off the light, but the cot is rough and his boxers are pulling. Small bumps feel like boulders. It's as if all the debris of the wasted east coast press through the floorboards and into his spine. But he’s made this bed and he’s going to lie in it, as they say.

After endless moments of shifting discomfort, Cole resigns himself to wondering what Hanzo might be truly up to. He first entertains the idea that he really does miss him, that he took the job not just for the money but for a chance at reconciliation. That his flirting is intentional. He quickly brushes that aside in pursuit of darker interpretations: he took the job for a chance at revenge, for whatever perceived slight he’s conjured up in that blackened mind of his. Or maybe he’s waiting for a chance to get back at Overwatch itself, for all it did to his clan, to his brother. Maybe he lied about being on good terms with Genji, wants to find a way back to him so he can finish the job. Or maybe he spoke the truth in the penthouse, and he really is just too proud to let a good deal go to someone else. Cole can’t say he’d turn away the same dollar amount, were he in Hanzo’s dragon-toed shoes. In some ways, once upon a time, he was -- when you've got nothing else in your life, what's more important than money?

He sighs and groans and tosses to his back, frowning up at the ceiling. Nebulous images from the past and even more unknowable shapes of the future coalesce into a language he will never be able to translate. He was never the type to lose hours to worry; never saw any sense in trying to read tea leaves. If anything, he leaves tracks for other, more deliberative people to explain. He's a doer, a man of action -- let others sort out the why's and how's. But now, in the claustrophobic embrace of a stuffy little domicile, abandoned long ago by those far better at surviving, he can't help the prickling cascade of his own restless thoughts. No time for a good smoke. No space to masturbate. Nothing to do but wait and see.

Cole lets his eyes swim on the shapes on the popcorn-patterned ceiling. In one corner, he thinks he can make out the pattern of a bird. Or maybe he’s just seeing what he wants to see. What is already imprinted on the walls of his own brain. Maybe he's incapable of seeing anything else.

Like the hieroglyphics on the tablets Ana used to keep in her office. She always implied that she could understand them, but never told Cole what they meant. Likely she wanted him to figure it out for himself. Which he did -- with Fareeha's help. Then he'd walked in one day with someone else's reports in his hand, just for an excuse to bring it up.

The Captain's pen flew as she finalized paperwork. More deaths, more explanations. Things Blackwatch never had to deal with. Things Blackwatch might be responsible for, which she might not even realize.

Without looking up, voice like tethered smoke: "what is it, Cassidy?"

The gunslinger stalled. "Got the Lithuania report for you."

Ana looked up with ready suspicion -- Cassidy never handled paperwork. Wouldn't spend a day out of the field if he could help it. Coming all the way to her office for a single report was out of character, even for a normal Blackwatch agent.

But she returned her attention to her own work anyway. "Take it to Liao, you know that's his territory."

He stalled some more. Really looked at her. The stress on her face was real, as real as the crow's feet by her eyes and the laugh lines by her mouth. Graying hair tied back a little too tight. Hint of lapis lazuli at her collar -- her headscarf, which she'd recently taken to wearing under her uniform. A sign of much-needed security, a reminder of better times.

Cole straightened his back. You could cheer her up.

"'O hawk! O restless son, traveling into this season. The snake writhes in your talons!'"

Ana slowly picked her head up. She looked at Cole like he'd just cussed her out.

"Really?"

"What?" Cole still grinned, one hand on his hip while the other finger-gunned the hieroglyphics. "Didn't I get it right?"

"Does this look like the time or place, Cassidy?"

"Alright, alright," Cole scoffed, rolling on his heel, heading for the door. Spurs scraping the nice upper-floor tile. "Just tryin'a make you smile, boss."

He was halfway out the door when her voice stopped him. "Did Fareeha tell you what it's from?"

He never could get a shot past her. He sputtered, stalled out. "Huh?"

"The tablet, cowboy."

“Fareeha didn’t --”

“It’s from the Book of the Dead. Spells to prepare the dead for entering the afterlife. Prayers to the god Horus.” Ana aimed her pen at Cole’s skull. “You want to make me smile?” Then she aimed at her own temple, beside her very own deadeye. “Try seeing something all the way through next time. Instead of just lining up the easiest shot.”

She smiled then. Arrogant, yet eternally loving. Legend among legends. One of his favorites.

Then the bird Cole thinks he saw in the popcorn ceiling turns into dust and shudders like a raincloud, making him jerk. Hanzo has returned. Did he ever leave? He hears his raspy voice on the floor above. Muted and fervent. He’s talking to someone on the phone, or so Cole’s half-asleep mind assumes. A high, coarse laugh -- who could Hanzo be laughing with at this time of night?

He doesn’t care. He wants to see Ana’s face again. He wants to live in a world where he can stand beside his old mentors like he used to, he wants to tell them, s *ee what I’ve become? See, it wasn't all for nothing.*

He brings his blanket higher up his ears and nourishes a dull ache in his chest: tears he pushed too far down, too long ago, to ever truly release.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a continuation of this one and will feature more intimate moments. I'm super glad to have the boys back together!!!

Thank you guys for reading, as always -- leave a comment if you please, I love reading them! Even little ones make my whole day.

NEXT UP: As Hanzo and Cole push into the old city, we learn more of what Cole's been up to since the two last saw each other.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So this is the second part of the three-part Jesse series! The next chapter will come pretty quickly, because I wrote both of them together and it just needs some final drafting. 9, 10 and 11 really kind of work as one, but, no one needs 40k chapters amirite?

I'm excited!!! The plot is thickening, the boys are back together... even the angst is about to let up. Somewhat. LOL enjoy! <3

Warnings: alcoholism, violence, mention of past drug use

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two Months Ago.

Cole Cassidy follows the faded trail of a cafeteria Christmas card across western Texas only to discover that Riley Jacob is dead. “About a month ago,” according to her lock-jawed grandma, who serves Cole a slice of cold apple pie on her plastic-covered couch. The gunslinger tries to hold in the dirt on his boots, listens with a somber air. A mean mug gone kind. The polished fork taps idly on the flowered china plate. A dull wind blows yellow dust past the screen windows, up the roof and into the barren sky. *Well, shit.*

He exits with deep thanks and a tipped hat, but his right hand is already dialing Pike’s number. *Did she fuck up on some other job, or was Talon just cleaning house? Just how big a deal are those little LumériCo crates? What if Pike and them’s next on the list?*

But the old man doesn’t pick up. After twelve more tries, after fresh gasoline and spicy tacos and twenty miles of road in-between, he still doesn’t pick up.

Dread settles on Cole’s guts like a vulture on the roof. Road's running out with no destination in sight.

The red sun is rising all over the white desert before he decides that it’s probably for the best that Pike doesn’t answer. He probably took Cole’s visit as a kind of ill omen, decided to send the whole gang underground right after their meeting. It’s Deadlock’s last resort: miles and miles of ancient mining tunnels and years’ worth of arms stock. Their only real defense

against the greater powers that be. Let the boys get some odd-jobs for awhile, blend back into the community, and push the whole operation into the gorge like a rattlesnake down its hole. Save the fangs for another day.

Good for you, old man. Keeps the gang safe, gives Cole some plausible deniability, and Talon doesn't get what they're after. Even Reyes would've called it a good idea.

But it won't last forever. Talon won't stop at Deadlock if they really want what's inside those LumériCo crates, and if they're willing to kill Riley over it (which Cole's gut says they were), they'll definitely try again. Maybe for an easier target -- now that Deadlock has spooked LumériCo with the theft, he doubts they'll be transporting those items across country anytime soon.

Cole lights a cigar. Squints against the open road. What could a company bent around clean energy have that Talon could want so badly?

And a company reeling from public humiliation at that. LumériCo got hit *hard* last summer. The Sombra collective, a talented group of hackers known only by their sugar skull marker, leaked emails showing that CEO Guillermo Portero was getting kickbacks for government land, practically stealing from the people -- they were even in negotiations with Vishkar, who were facing their own investigations for their involvement in Rio de Janeiro. It was a cluster fuck, as Gabe used to say. News coverage lasted for months. LumériCo barely managed to keep their stock. The revolutionary group Los Muertos (though Cole knows a gang when he sees one,) called for Portero's head.

Portero was forced to temporarily step down, but -- as Cole recalls the latest news -- the CEO has been mostly exonerated. The man was a Crisis soldier -- big fighters make for harder comebacks. Cole can easily see LumeriCo pushing money into new ventures *fast* to make up for that fiasco. The world of mega-corporations is more powerful than ever and no one can afford a misstep. Maybe something to bolster their huge, vulnerable network infrastructure. Maybe something to shut down the resistance for good.

Whatever it is, if it's interesting enough to catch Deadlock's eye, he can all-too easily imagine Talon rushing to the front of the line. Only a matter of time before they make their move.

And Cole might be the only person on Earth who can do anything about it.

So he takes what's left of his bad luck and stretches it across the oldest highway into Mexico. The winter sun is faded but hits his smile all the same; his luck's always been better down south. He'll find answers there, as sure as the turning of the earth.

'There were plants and birds and rocks and things, there was sand and hills and things…'

The big Elvis lighter flashes again, but the flame's getting weaker. Cole's lost count of how many times he's had a Cohiba in his mouth since Gibraltar -- the box is getting as hollow as

the landscape. So much for saving them for a special occasion.

To his left is arid scrubland. To his right, barren hills. The road grows grating around these parts, as do the radio stations. Everything's still in disrepair from the Crisis but there's no funds allocated for places where no one goes. Hyper-trains and planes have long-since been the main carriers of people across wastelands like this, where you can't even count on a gas station to get you through. But Cole's got two half-full red tanks in the bed and a lot of experience off the beaten path. That'll last him at least until Monterrey.

He drops an empty bag of plantain chips onto the pile of guns and ammo on the passenger seat. He'd never travel through parts like these with an empty passenger seat -- an old superstition, he isn't sure where he picked it up -- but rifles and shotguns make for poor conversation partners. The only things he has to listen to are the bad radio, the rattling bands of the used-up blue truck, and the increasingly bizarre hammer of his own heart.

You're too wound up, he imagines Hanzo saying, though the real Hanzo would've phrased it with a might more eloquence. *Too in your head. You should learn how to meditate.*

I can go without it, Cole's internal advocate pipes. *Been going without it all my life.*

And where has that gotten you?

The gunslinger silently snarls. Licks his teeth. Rolls down the window just enough to let the smoke out. This kind of internal argument isn't new, but the characters are. With only the highway and his own unfinished business to keep him company, he's itching for something harder than cigars.

He looks around the car. Probably unwise to dip into that bottle of Jack under the seat. Same goes for the green rolled up next to the remaining Cubans.

With a grunt, he re-settles in his seat, moves his long legs to keep them from getting stiff. Then he reaches into his pocket and calls the first number he sees.

"Hello? Cassidy?"

"Winston! How's it going, partner?"

"You're… uh, we're not supposed to be communicating. Athena, are you tracking his line?"

Athena's silvery voice sounds off in the background: "one moment, Winston."

"It's fine," Cole drawls, dragging out the vowel, sliding his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, "Got a new phone, untraceable. Top of the black-market-line. Probably too low-tech to even show up on her scan."

Winston doesn't respond. *Careful as ever.* Cole almost feels bad for calling. But after a beat, he hears Athena's drone in the background: "Agent Cassidy's line is not responding to my sensors."

"See now? Nothing to fret over."

"I’m not sure, Cole…” Winston clears his throat, mutters in the careful tone of an almost-scolding, like a disappointed professor: “I didn’t expect to see you on the news so soon.”

“Well,” Cole tongues his left canine, “You know how it is.”

"I… I really don’t --”

“Bounty as high as mine, was only a matter of time before word got around. It’ll fade back into the news cycle after a spell, don’t you worry.”

"Well, I suppose it’s alright to talk now... given the state of things.”

"State-o’-what?”

“I… we expected more signs of surveillance from our, uh, old adversaries... but, nothing. Even after that attack last spring, Athena would regularly find invasion code trying to worm through her securities. Drones on the radar. But now… nothing.”

“Huh.” Cole almost chews on the cigar. “Maybe they’re onto some other fish. Hard to say, with birds like that.”

“Yes, well… we will still keep an eye on them. And we’re keeping busy with the repairs. I will have to wait to do anything about the comm tower, but, the rest of the clean-up is well underway. Oh, hey… happy almost-Christmas.”

“Same to you, big guy.”

“Any plans?”

“Oh, some,” Cole says, eyeing a smear of vultures tearing into something at the edge of the highway. “No snow in my neck o’ the woods, though. Just a lotta things with scales and talons.”

“Ah, yes. Well. Lena may come here with Emily. It’ll be good to have --”

“Say, Winston... what’d y’all get up to on the moon?”

"...For Christmas?”

“Nah, just -- in general.” Cole finally looks away from where he’d spotted the vultures through the windshield and raps on the steering wheel. “Must’ve been hard-pressed for distraction. Just you and the gang on a rock in space, and all.”

Winston goes quiet -- Cole assumes he's in deep thought and hushes up, too. For all his time spent studying with humans, Winston still occasionally seems unpracticed. Like a bookish teenager. But, then again, hardly any of the people Cole meets are as greased in the wheels as he.

"Well, we had pretty strict schedules. Uhh... breakfast, morning exercises, lessons interspersed with lunch -- food was an integral component of the lessons, as reward -- then

some free-time in the gymnasium. Sometimes Dr. Winston would take me to the greenhouse, or show me what he was working on elsewhere. We had private lessons after awhile."

"Guess there wasn't time to get bored."

"Not really. But, even if I did have, uh, time alone -- I always had reading."

"Did you? Have time alone, that is?"

"Well, yes. Lots of it, after awhile." Cole can practically hear Winston adjusting his glasses and leaning back in his chair. "The Horizon experiments were not uniform. Specimen results varied across a wide spectrum. There was no other gorilla on the colony like me. I was quieter, more curious. I believe Dr. Winston spared me special attention because I was so interested in learning. So I did not spend a great deal of time with the other gorillas, and they didn't, uh... seem to miss me."

Cole pulls hard on the cigar, thinking of Gabe. The way he used to talk about the Soldier Enhancement Program he and Jack joined when they were still fresh young fighters. Numbers in a long line. Bonded through survival. As the truck bounces over a crack in the road, the gunslinger looks out at the scrub brush and wonders if there are any old government bunkers hidden in that wide open space, growing more weapons for the wars to come. Above the hills, he sees the pale sliver of the daytime moon and tries to remember what life was like before the Crisis cracked the whole world in half.

"Cole?"

His voice comes back high, but strident -- as if he'd never paused. "You're one-of-a-kind, Winston, that's for sure."

He chuckles. "Well… Overwatch is a good place for the one-of-a-kind types."

There's longing in his voice. Cole feels something similar build in his own chest, but knocks it down with a hard swing. "She'll be back up and running in no time. Then you can tell me more moon stories."

"Well, there was this one time when Dr. Winston was working on this formula to accelerate the variations of --"

"Alright, big guy, you give Lena and Emily my love and have yourselves a good time now, y'hear?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you. You too, Cole."

He hangs up and puffs a little too hard on the cigar, making him temporarily light-headed.

Five minutes later, he dials Genji. No response. *Typical Shimada.*

Lena's phone goes to a busy signal. Could be a decoy -- he knows she's being extra-cautious lately, since it hasn't just been the gunslinger's face appearing in the news. Cole thinks of

Emily, whom he's never met but heard so much about last fall; Lena has much more to keep safe than he.

Then he tries Angela, who picks up on the second ring. All business.

"Gruetzi?"

Cole lifts up his whole voice, half-yells, "Grewt-zee, doc!"

Angela starts to say his name but comes to a crashing halt after the first syllable. "Are you in danger? What's happening?"

"Nope, just driving down an old dirt road. Wanted to hear your lovely voice."

"Is this line secure? You know we are not supposed to be communicating!"

"C'mon, Angie, don't get nervous. I'm just an old colleague calling for a lil' holiday chat. Don't they do that in Switzerland?"

"An old colleague who is wanted in every country," she breaks, letting out a wheezing, stressed-out laugh; too weary to deny his charm. "It is good to hear from you. I am in not in Switzerland right now, so my holiday chat may be short."

"Oh yeah? Where you at?"

"...The place we visited with the others last fall. Still cold."

Russia. Of course Angela would spend her Christmas in the most needy part of the world.

"Haven't heard from anyone else, have ya? Fareeha? I was gonna try her next, but I figured she'd be ass-deep in work after that promotion."

"I talked to her last week, actually." There's a shuffling of papers, or maybe a rustle of clothes. Still hard at work. "Helix has her stationed permanently at the Anubis facility. Ever since that restart, they're taking no chances."

"She ever mention how it managed to wake up again?"

"No. She was very quiet about the whole thing. But all of the God AI were quarantined after the Crisis. Anubis is just one of the oldest, and the older systems are always harder to keep under firewall. Or so they say."

"Mm ." Cole pushes the cigar to the other side of his mouth. "So how'd she sound?"

More rustling. "Who?"

"Fareeha."

"Oh -- of course. Well enough, I would say. Working hard, as always. There is much for a new captain to do."

"What's she doing for Christmas?"

"Spending it with her father in Canada, I assume. We didn't speak of it. This time of year… it is not the easiest for her, you know." A chorus of straps and ripping velcro -- the sounds of forward-camp emergency supplies. "Really, she hardly had the energy to talk at all."

"Yeah. Bet she rallied for you, though."

"Perhaps."

"No joke, doc -- you're probably her one contact outside of Helix. Aside from her dad, that is."

"She did sound tired. A soldier is always on duty, *ja?* And she has dreamed of such for as long as I have known her."

Cole hums around the cigar; all he ever heard Fareeha talk about was Overwatch. Fighting alongside her mom. A Crisis kid through-and-through. Fareeha didn't remember the time before. "Too true."

"You should see the soldiers here, Cole. You would be encouraged, I think." Angela's voice takes on as much swooning as possible from someone like her, which isn't a lot, but Cole still recognizes it. "There's this woman, a decade younger than I -- she was born in the worst of it. She became a star athlete, was about to participate in a national championship, but gave it all up to help her village. She's a sergeant now."

"Damn."

"She is an invaluable asset to the efforts here. We will be at it well past Christmas at this rate, but…" A sigh, the kind Angela reserves for any and all talk of ongoing struggle; the majority of her life. And then, a sudden laugh. "Look at this. Already, you have me reminiscing and waxing like you do! How are *you* doing? What are you up to, Cole Cassidy?"

Cole grunts, "Oh, you know how it is." Then, with urgency: "you hear from anyone else? Lena, Rein?"

"Lena, no -- she is all over the place, you know her. But I did hear from Emily! She said they may go snowboarding with Lúcio after the New Year. Reinhardt and Brigitte are with Torbjörn and Ingrid and all of the children, of course. I am quite jealous. I miss Ingrid's pies."

Cole tries not to think back to his ill-gotten baked goods in grandma Jacob's dining room on that dusty El Paso afternoon. "Ain't it so."

"And Genji sent me a letter."

"A letter? An honest-to-God letter?"

That bell-like laugh again. "He's fond of them! So am I. A lost art, I think. And he has a lot to say, especially… now."

"Mm .” Cole takes the cigar out of his mouth, holds it while he grips the steering wheel with both hands. “How's he holding up, by the way?”

Angela hesitates. “That is not exactly… I meant that, he has much to say now that he has found greater clarity with Zenyatta. I was not referring to recent events.”

“I dunno, doc. He was bright red when -- when his brother took off. Thought Zen was never gonna calm him down.”

"Zenyatta seemed to think he was fine,” Angela muses. “He said nothing the whole time.”

“I dunno. You know how Genji is. Better than I do, I reckon. The shit he said --”

"-- Were products of the moment, Cole.” Angela sighs, forgetting her ‘covert agent’ voice and slipping into something more like crinkling gold foil; a tired angel, weighed down by her own overtaxed wings. “Genji has every reason to be upset, do not misunderstand me. But he has reached a more equitable state than I ever thought possible. Zenyatta has been a tremendous influence on him. The man I met at Gibraltar was a man who had done serious inner work. His mentality is probably better than any of ours now, despite his outburst. Although, I am no psychologist, but these letters --”

"So all that was true?” Cole glares at the road. “Everything he said? About… y’know, when it happened?”

"I do not know. I was not there.” She takes a slow breath, then the sounds of velcro start up again. “All I will say is that Genji’s wounds were extensive. It is a miracle he survived. I have my theories as to how, a few of them involving his dragon. I am not sure he should ever have been allowed to join us at all, given his state, but… many things were out of my hands back then. It was a season of triage.”

Cole flashes back to the narrow halls of Blackwatch, coming across Genji on a mission or a stake-out -- never in a common room or the gym. If Genji ever trained with someone, it was in the simulators, or under the note-taking eyes of the cybernetics team. If they met in the halls or in a meeting, they gave each other a wide berth. Both of them were fresh out of insulated gangs, both distrustful. Both more than happy to focus on their own goals. An outlaw eager to skip prison, a ninja dead-set on revenge -- each thinking the other a fool. Not totally unlike he and Hanzo on the rock.

Then, a few polite exchanges. A few careful questions. His relationship with Genji did eventually shift into something that could be called amicable, but even then, whenever the young outcast was around, the cloud of his dark purpose came with him. For the first few months, Cole thought they really had stripped the man of his humanity. He’d kill a dozen Talon agents and say nothing, just stare with those eyes. Little pinpricks of red. The first time Cole saw his dragon, he thought he’d seen the devil.

But there was always Reyes to keep them corralled. Reyes, who kept a well-run chessboard at all times. If one piece fell, he’d somehow procure a new one. He had a hand in every fire, would’ve been everywhere at once if he could’ve. Delegated rarely. When he made Cole his lieutenant, Cole thought he’d finally earned that new leaf. Gabe didn’t care where Cole had

come from, didn't care about the things he'd done. Gabe honored his skill, laughed at his jokes, showed him a world Deadlock never could've hoped to unlock. After awhile, the fact that he'd threatened Cole into joining seemed an afterthought.

Back then, it was all more than he ever would've imagined. And he'd imagined quite a bit.

Did Talon get to Gabe like it got to Riley? Is that really what lit the fuse?

"Cole?"

He tries to speak, winds up having to clear his throat. "Sorry."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure enough, doc." He clears his throat again. "Got lost for a second. You know -- those long open roads. Too close to the holidays and whatnot."

"Oh, Cole..." Angela takes on the tone of the counselor, which bothers him, but he understands more than most what type of woman she is. She's trained her whole life to heal. It's more than her calling -- it's her nature. She never had to turn over a new leaf in all her life. It was a long and rocky road from child prodigy to world-acclaimed physician, but it was one single road: no detours, no branches. And guided by the most benevolent of lights. Sometimes it's hard *not* to think of Angela as an actual, real-life angel.

Cole opens his mouth to reassure her that he's fine, or change the subject, but she beats him to it. "Perhaps it is best you do not think of these things. Put it behind you. Look to the future."

"Yeah." Cole straightens up, puts the cigar back between his teeth. "Got shit to do. Team needs us and all."

"That is… not exactly what I meant."

"Come again?"

She hesitates. "Just that... perhaps things happened for the best. Perhaps... we should not attempt to restart what ended so harshly."

He hangs his jaw. "What're you talking about, Ange? Overwatch is *family* --"

"Shh!" The doctor pauses, and Cole realizes that she's finally sat down; all of her focus is suddenly on him alone. "If you care about your family, if you love them as you should, then you should keep *yourself* safe. I never understood it, I really didn't. Everyone talks about hating war, but still they want to fight. Everyone excuses themselves, saying they need to protect the ones they love, but the ones they love are at home. Waiting for them. Did you never wonder how Ingrid became so good at baking pies? If everyone just went home -- that is to say --" She forces herself to take a breath. Two breaths. Five.

"Angie…"

"I have also learned from Zenyatta, Cole. Through Genji's letters. Nature has a way of balancing things out. Sometimes we just have to accept reality and move on."

He chuckles, short and dark. "That's a lot to swallow, coming from a doctor."

"Yes, well," Angela's tone goes distant, frosty as an Alpine peak. "We are all still paying the cost of science without limitations."

"Are you talking about --?"

"I am afraid that I have to go, Cole. We will talk again soon, *ja?* Take care."

"Uhh… you, too."

"Happy Christmas."

Angela hangs up. Cole looks at his phone. His thumb hovers over the call-back button, but then raises up to shut it off entirely. He shoves it in the glove compartment and turns up the radio instead. *Everyone's got their own reasons for doing what they do, cowboy. But you got your own justice to keep. Can't trust anyone but yourself to keep it.*

The voice doesn't sound like anyone in particular, but he can all-too easily imagine Hanzo nodding along. What did he call him before -- a *rōnin?* Something like an aimless wanderer; no one to serve but himself. Not too different from all romantic notions of the word 'cowboy.' Or, more apt -- *outlaw.*

"Prove you wrong, darlin'," he mutters, pressing on the gas.

Eventually, the sky darkens and that daytime moon gets trapped behind dense cloud. All he has are the few feet of headlights and his own reassuring turquoise glow.

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Aside from the fresh snow, it's as if the blizzard never happened. A bright pink dawn splits open Cole's crinkled lids like a morning bugle, uninhibited by cloud nor smog. He rises at once, peers through the space between the window boards. A little awe creeps in; he remembers how the snow never used to last long on the streets of New York City, even in the outer boroughs. Too much heat from man and machine. Now glittering powder rounds out

every jagged edge and rusted surface, from the shells of abandoned cars to the boughs of sleeping trees. It lends a beautiful uniformity to the crumpling chaos, but as he pulls on his boots, he can't help but twitch at the unnatural quiet. Even the desert has its voices.

The silence is broken only when he picks up the short huffs coming from the room across the entryway. Cole leans way over to look past the arched doorway to find Hanzo doing one-handed push-ups in his black ops suit. He's shedded the top half and has the sleeves tied off around his waist. He's close to the front of the house, keeping away from the mysterious boxes gathered near the back. Cole can't make out his expression -- the boarded-off windows let in only stark bars of peachy light -- but he gets a sense of his mood when Hanzo calls over, lightly: "I thought to wake you, but you seemed to need the rest."

Cole grunts, straightens up. Immediately reaches for his auto-paste toothbrush to cover the way his gaze lingered on the criss-crossing sunrise along the archer's back. "Can't never sleep past the sun."

Hanzo looks up, not altering his form in the slightest. "I thought you might call down every omnic within a square mile."

"Huh?"

He smirks. "Your snoring."

Cole scoffs, then gives him a rude gesture on his way to the bathroom. Hanzo only chuckles.

His boots crunch carelessly over the broken glass and tile. He rubs his beard in the mirror, scrubs his teeth. Relieves himself with an eye on the window to the backyard -- full of debris and picked-apart appliances. The plumbing, while effective, makes such a god-awful sound when he flushes that he strides right back out of there as soon as he can.

He looks down at Hanzo as he passes again, getting an even better look at his back. Beads of sweat roll like drops of gold over his winding tattoo. There's so many shadows between so many muscles that Cole gets target panic.

The fact that he can *smell* Hanzo, that it's taking him back to every training simulation and post-workout drunk they'd ever shared, has Cole grinding his jaw by the time he gets out of the man's line of sight.

It ai n't fair.

He busies himself with gear check. He packed light, as he always does -- just a few essentials for your average excursion into omnic-ridden post-apocalyptic zones. Dry antibacterial wipes, which he drags over his sweaty parts with diligent speed. Capsules for his arm and drops for his dead-eye. Tablets for immunity and electrolytes. Change of clothes, food packs. A hard-case that doubles as a heater and a water purifier. Mini multi-tool, bio-med packs. 15 feet of line, duct tape. Explosives.

And, of course, the little LumériCo cube at the bottom of his duffel.

"I did not make many discoveries last night," Hanzo says. "No sign of omnics, but a few signs of humans. Bullet casings. Salvaged parts. Poor attempts at basic shelter-building -- probably nomadic, or scavengers. But I saw no one. Not even today."

"You went out this morning, too?"

"Yes."

Cole thinks of the leanness he saw on Hanzo last night, the dark circles under his eyes. *Must be some insomnia.*

Good.

Clucking his tongue, he resumes pulling on his black tactical suit and hunting around for his jeans. "Well, we'll be real careful then. I'll try Lindholm once we head out, too."

An acquiescing grunt. "There are refurbished businesses closer to the bridge, but they were all closed for the storm. Heavy bars on the windows, gates over the doors. They may be open today." There's another grunt and a soft shuffle as Hanzo switches to his other arm and resumes the exercise. "I determined two routes that are adequate for traversing the crumbling infrastructure. The details should be on your mobile."

Cole finishes putting his boots back on and picks up his phone to flick open Hanzo's map. The satellite imaging is poor, but he can clearly make out the plotted blue lines from their location to midtown Manhattan.

"You think the mayor is gonna give us some kind of reception?"

"Perhaps not. But, at the very least, we should obtain as much data as possible before proceeding to the Watchpoint. They must have some information. They've been fighting long enough."

Cole shrugs on a plain brown shirt and then fastens his armor. The tubes hiss gently as they clamp flush against the corresponding sockets on his chest, over the shirt, seeping energy through the cloth and instantly cooling his too-warm body. He wonders if he even needs the undersuit, if he's already so heated, but one look at Hanzo tells him his body temperature is related more to situational circumstances than climate. It'll be cold outside anyway.

Then Hanzo moves with unnatural grace into a handstand and Cole pointedly looks away.

He rummages for a food pack, picks out a rice and beans mixture, and slaps it down on the heat. Then he goes about packing up camp, trying to block out all the grunts and panting noises.

None of this is helped by the fact that it's just about that time for him to start really missing sex. Before he'd nodded off last night, somewhere between the sad remembering and the tug of exhaustion, he'd tossed almost-bare beneath the blanket and imagined every brush of fabric as a caress. Simultaneously conjuring and evading thoughts of hands. He needs to be touched, to be squeezed -- tested for ripeness.

His frown turns sour as he switches off the heat-lamp. *This really ain't fair.* It's not fair he's stuck out here with --

"Yo."

Cole looks up. Hanzo is on one knee and looking down at something in one of the back rooms.

"What?" says Cole, walking over, thinking that maybe the plumbing has in fact burst.

But no; two brown cats have wandered out from between the boxes, peeking at the two men with no sign of fear. One of them, missing half an ear, yowls several times while the other approaches Hanzo's outstretched hand. It sniffs, then butts its forehead against his fingers.

"Must smell the food cooking," Cole mutters.

"Hn." Hanzo strokes the cat fluidly, responds to its pacing. Still when it wants to push its face against him, stroking when it walks by with a proud tail. Ambivalent --like a cat himself.

The other one simply watches along with Cole, who can't help but purse his lips. Something seems out of place, watching Hanzo pet an animal. Like he expected him to stare stiffly at it before shooing it with a sharp noise and a nudging foot.

Then he chastises himself: *he's not a goddamn cartoon villain.* Cole can damn well look after himself during this job without this sickly wave of suspicion accompanying his every moment. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like who he wants to be. He can keep the distrust and still ease up on the attitude -- before it winds up into real anger, anyway.

So he steps forward and slowly crouches next to Hanzo. He takes off a glove and strokes the cat's head with gentle scratches. The archer alters nothing, just continues brushing his knuckles against its flank, still breathing deep from the workout.

The gross silence goes on for about five seconds before Cole blurts out: "ever have any pets?"

In the hang of the pause, he swears Hanzo is about to ignore him, or respond with something derisive, or stand up and stalk away.

But he doesn't -- he just grunts in agreement. "Two dogs." He pauses his hand when the cat rolls onto its back. "Akitas. One, when I was a child. My father's dog. Jun. He died when I was fifteen." He tries to touch the cat's stomach, but it claws playfully. He takes the scratches while it tries to hold his hand and bite it. "Then we got another. Kuma." Hanzo retracts his hand until the cat flops onto its side, permitting his slow strokes down its back. "We were close. But they were bred for protection above all. Not truly pets."

Cole makes a noise to show he has heard, mimicking Hanzo's very quintessential grunt, but his stomach feels like it's expanding past all capacity. He's never heard Hanzo be so forthcoming with personal details, no matter how trivial, without at least five glasses of booze between his mouth and his brain. The easy intimacy, which from anyone else would be

nothing -- an expected behavior -- generates something almost giddy in the gunslinger. Like the slight brush of Hanzo's hand against his own as they both hunt for something soft and warm; a slight tingling. The promise of electricity.

And then, as a follow-up, his own interior warning siren: *you enjoy getting whiplash, cowboy?*

The cat suddenly rises and scampers off, back to its friend. Hanzo brushes his hands together. "And you?"

Cole swallows against sudden dryness, lifts himself up with a grunt. "Deadlock had a few dogs around," he drawls, easing his thumbs behind his belt. "Always liked 'em. Uhh... used to get hell for feeding 'em, then Pike -- one o'the bosses -- gave in and made 'em guards. Sometimes they'd kip in the back with the boys." He looks down at Hanzo with just the shadow of a grin. "Used to befriend a few coyotes, too."

Hanzo looks at him with disbelief, still crouched. "Coyotes?"

"Yeah. Like… small wolves?"

"I know what coyotes are, Cassidy." Now he rises, dusting off his knees. "I simply doubt your claim that you 'befriended' them."

"Well, I did. Had a few lizards hang around at one point, too." Cole lets his eyes briefly trace the impossible curve of Hanzo's rib cage into his waist -- just for a second. Hardly noticeable. "Horny toads. Scorpions."

Hanzo, deadpan: "'scorpions.'"

"Real playful lil' fuckers. Sleepy in the daytime, though."

A low, loose chuckle falls from Hanzo's chest. He looks away, but the smile lingers. He sounds easier, warmer than Cole's ever heard. "You have a tall tale for every occasion."

Cole smiles big now; warmed all-over. Coyly: "don't believe me?"

Mirth touches Hanzo's face in odd ways. Sudden laughter, amusement, affection -- Cole's seen all of these before, but rarely have they lasted. Some errant thought always seems to invade his good mood; like a cloud of swooping birds, it bots out whatever warmth tried to move in. Plucks it out by the root.

Now isn't much different. Hanzo glances to the floor, to the boxes, then to somewhere in the vicinity of Cole's throat.

His tone feels like winter: "is the gear packed properly?"

Cole mutters, "Most of it."

"Finish the rest." Hanzo pulls up the sleeves of his suit and zips it up to the neck. "I will retrieve the sensors. Then we will leave."

Cole almost bites his tongue. “Wait.”

Hanzo pauses, one foot on the first stair.

"You, uh… you want any of this?”

Hanzo glances at the steaming food pack Cole points to, pauses, then resumes walking up the stairs. “Thank you. I already ate.” Just before disappearing, he tosses him an up-and-down look. There's amusement in his low voice: “don’t forget your belt.”

Cole stares at the spot for a moment, then shuffles solo to his breakfast. He wolfs it down, spares a few bites for the animals. Grumbles under his breath. *Every alley cat deserves a good scratch behind the ears now and again.*

At least they're a lucky sign, he tells himself. Like a blue sky after a dark blizzard. Like the blazing red serape he now throws over his shoulders, stealth be damned; he’s got to take good omens when he thinks of them.

But he has no idea what to think about Hanzo. Hot or cold, enemy or not. What do dragons represent in his lexicon of desert symbols? A preening snake, a ruthless eagle? Why should he even bother with someone so capricious, so laden with woe? Isn’t his own load heavy enough? Would he even have these feelings if they hadn’t met under the swelling hope for a new Overwatch, the blinding optimism of yet another new leaf to turn? Everything looks good under a tangerine sunset and a deep glass of rye. There wasn’t even enough time to search under the hood of a man so densely complicated.

Yet, even now, he finds himself wanting to pick apart that complication something fierce -- even when the man’s shirt is on. Like an itch he never got to scratch. Like a teenage summer fling that ended before it could even begin.

Whiplash, cowboy.

He sighs, turns off the heat lamp, and slots it into its pocket on his duffel. He stands, looks around. The cats look up at him. Waiting for more.

Cole turns on his heel, muttering, “Stay warm, fellas,” and heads out the way he came.

They cross through a cemetery just after dawn. Cole stands on the highest hill, holds the edge of his serape against the wind and squints at the main island’s few remaining skyscrapers. Even after the post-Crisis rebuild began, the luxurious energy that drove ancient industrialists to reach for the sky had long since dried up. The majority of the remaining taller buildings are mostly uptown, around where Central Park begins; the old World Trade One is a lonely giant in the desert of downtown. In this sunshine, from where Cole stands, it’s like looking at a gleaming spire of blinding energy. Guiding them to their destination. Another good omen. *Hi ho, silver.*

He needs all the good omens he can gather. Torbjörn never answered (crabby old stickler likely sticking to Winston's rule), they've found a few more bullet casings (just trying to hunt the invading deer, hopefully), and he's almost run out of cigars (with no ready supply chain in sight). The one in his mouth has burned half-way since breakfast and he's trying to make it last.

"You cut a bold mark through this debris, gunslinger."

Cole glances at Hanzo over his shoulder. "What'd you say?"

"Your serape. We will be spotted all the way from New Jersey with you wearing that thing."

Cole lifts his fingers and licks the brim of his hat at Hanzo, like he's dishing both civility and slur. "Authenticity is important in places like this, Shimada. Besides -- it's lucky."

"Yes, and I am sure that the bullet holes provide considerable aerodynamic advantage."

Cole doesn't deign to respond to sarcasm -- not on a morning grand as this. "Now, listen here," he slips into work-mode as easily as he'd raise his gun, "We get to meeting any of these people, you just let me do all the talking."

"I did manage *some* successful negotiations while head of an international organization, Cassidy."

"Don't doubt your boardroom prowess, but I know these kinds'a people. Frontiersman. American hold-outs. Places with little law and lotsa hardship. We got more in common."

"I see."

Cole glances back to see Hanzo inspecting Storm Bow's string, testing the give. The black ops suit looks better on him than it did when they'd first boarded that plane; all gray seams and hugging mesh. Cole swings his jaw around, re-focuses on the path ahead.

Hanzo's voice is cool. "I concede to your authority."

"Why, thank y'kindly."

Cole hears him nock an arrow. "But you should know that I am used to dealing with Americans."

"I recall you saying as much, yeah."

"I always found them to be rude."

"Hey, now."

"Though I will admit, you are more polite than any I have met. Usually."

Cole chuckles. "Well, you're ruder than most Japanese I've met, so I guess it all evens out."

Hanzo chuckles back. “We never do seem to witness each other at our best, do we?”

That laugh warms him too keenly; his judgments slap back. “And just what time of life would you consider your best, Shimada?”

The world grows twice as quiet in as many seconds.

And Cole almost chews through his cigar. There’s a sensation in his chest like the building of a cold; phlegmatic, a dense webbing. Asking for a few shots of whiskey or a good hacking cough. Could be the holiday chain smoking, could be his mounting temper. *There’s that famous Cassidy attitude,* as Gabe liked to say. He’d go off on Pike the same way -- filled with a righteous fire that would burn hot and fast and be forgotten fifteen minutes later. Most got used to it. More civilized and procedural types, like Angela, or Jack -- they never had the time nor patience. Only reason Gabe put up with it was because he just didn't care. Or maybe he knew just how deep Cole's loyalty lay. *Lied.*

But this situation is already too tense to be adding his temper to the mix. One misstep on what looks like a soft hill of snow may wind up with a plummet to God knows where. And giving Hanzo the sharp words that are stinging his own throat would just be rattling already ramshackle cage. The job’s too important for that.

He squints up at the bright winter sun; almost high noon. The cast of their shadows are short. Cole looks down at his own, at the distinctive silhouette. The black filling in between. That’s what resentment feels like -- a mass. A big, ugly oil spill.

But as soon as he opens his mouth, Hanzo speaks: “do you have any experience with sparrows, Cassidy?”

Cole doesn’t turn. Hesitates before responding. “Can’t say that I do.”

"Oftentimes, with animals, smaller means tougher. Sparrows are no exception. If they decide they want the territory of another bird, they will kill them all. It is not enough to get them their own space -- they completely take over. They are aggressive fighters and will drive off any who invade their area.”

The gunslinger steels. “You trying to say something?”

"I know you have heard my little brother’s old nickname. Perhaps you should consider that there are angles of the story that you don’t know.” Then Cole turns to see Hanzo look to the side, as if scanning their peripherals, those sleek cat-eyes narrowed in gloom. “Something to think about.”

The cigar hangs from Cole's dropped jaw. Aside from the little voice in his head droning *arrogant, arrogant,* he really can't believe what he's just heard.

But before he can retort, he's interrupted again.

A splatter of white in the snowbank to his left. He determines the trajectory of someone aiming for his head even before he hears the echo of the rifle. The cigar falls to the ground.

Hanzo is already running out of the street, Cole at his heels. He's up and moving even before his brain catches up with his instincts and shouts back what his legs have already figured out:

Sniper.

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Three weeks ago.

Cole Cassidy lights his fortieth cigarette of the day. He picked up the habit sometime after his first visit to LumériCo headquarters. Cigars are for taking your time, for when you wouldn't mind the minutes stretching on a little past their due; cigarettes are for when you can't go fast enough, when hours slip past like shallow breaths. In the milky yellow light of the most disreputable bar in Dorado, he tries to hold down the smoke, settles in with his very own bottle of *tequila reposado* and reviews the past couple weeks so he can figure out what the hell went wrong.

It was a whole new kind of job; it required a whole new kind of toolset. He couldn't risk being recognized this time, and with a company as paranoid as LumériCo to deal with, he had to assemble a whole new persona before even passing city limits. New IDs, fingerprint film, retinal circuit-lenses. Reworked financial history with double-checked alibis. Blonde hair, fake paunch, additional beard and brilliant Hawaiian shirt. Cover for the skull on his arm, two night vision cameras fitted underneath. A low Southern drawl replaced with an easy Midwestern tenor. Friends in New Orleans helped him set up decoy sightings to redirect the bounty hunters and the press in one go.

By the time Cole ditched his truck, weaponry and other Southwestern accumulations, he was someone entirely new. Nigh-percolating with energy as he climbed into a tour bus bound for the coast. Just like the old days -- ready to hit the ground running.

But the ground hit back. He took photos on LumériCo's guided tour, stepped off the queue a few times to sneak around their R&D department, even sweet-talked a few employees into getting drinks after-hours... nothing doing. All he got for his trouble was the knowledge that they do, in fact, have a new top secret Special Projects zone, and that he is never getting into it. Not without a full strike team and six weeks of planning. Apart from being eight levels below the earth and guarded by sentinel tech unavailable in consumer markets, even the

people in charge are ghost employees: identities kept so secret, they probably hardly ever even leave the plant.

Cole sighs and presses a cold lime against the shiner under his left eye. He'd done his due diligence as far as LumériCo went, no question. It was when he went scrounging for help that the real trouble started.

He knew seeking out Los Muertos was risky, but he also knew that they have no love for LumériCo, and that they're somehow connected to the Sombra collective. With Portero still in charge, he figured they'd be up for round two. So he went a darker brunette, adopted a fake nose, and tried to seem more like a local. Like he'd blown in from a small town nearby, hungry for revolution.

Except his Spanish isn't the best and his ability to take attitude from fellow gangsters is worse. They didn't discover his true identity, but they still wanted no part of his deal. By the time the encounter was over, Cole counted himself lucky to have walked away with only the one busted eye.

Now LumériCo HQ is empty and the streets are painted in *piñata* remains. Confetti gathers over the warm cobblestone like second skin, gleaming under thousands of string-lights and holiday revelers. Cole's disguises are back in his motel room and himself is thrown over the counter at a bar called Calaveras. The night is just getting started, but he is bone-tired; he can be a very patient man, but this kind of scout work isn't his forte. Every part of his body wants to move to offense already. But he can't move yet -- hence the booze.

There's only one other person who seems set on drinking themselves past midnight, and she seems occupied with trying to discern the origins of the dark house liquor through her glass. He silently wishes her luck and concentrates on his cigarette. And his *tequila,* which has begun to run out -- just like his own luck.

Letting the liquor speak: *it'll change, cowboy. Doesn't it always?*

Somewhere outside, he can hear the bar's guitarist serenading the neighbors on their way to *Misa de Gallo* . He imagines the cathedral full of people, flashes back to the few Christmases he's spent in back pews, praying earnestly to saints and then, when he got older, dead friends. He wonders what counsel Gabriel would offer now, if he were at the gunslinger's shoulder. Probably tell him to get off his ass, get a good sleep and start fresh tomorrow. Which, he will. *Once I've finished toasting your memory,* jefe.

Ana would likely say something similar. So would Jack, although the Strike Commander might also suggest calling someone; always a proponent of rallying the troops for a good cause.

Cole shoots down that idea fast -- not the time nor place. Everyone else has got their letters, their dinners. Their snowboarding after New Years. No point in breaking into these rare opportunities for celebration with business he's sure he'll be able to tackle with just a few more days hard recon.

Still, he can't help but think about how much easier all of this would be with a partner. Someone steadier, slower. More methodical. Someone like Hanzo.

Cole slumps further over the bar, turns his eyes to the holovid but looks right past it. There is the nagging consideration that maybe, if he explained the whole thing to Winston, the guy would have some brilliant solution at the ready. But that's a last resort; Winston's great, but he's no black ops commander. He's too meticulous, too careful. He'll spend days setting everything up before risking a potential indictment with the UN. Pike and the gang will run out of resources and Talon will make their move on either LumeriCo or Deadlock before a single blue coat gets within sniffing distance of that Special Projects division.

Besides, Cole thinks, sniffing hard on the stale odor of spilled beer and old sweat -- *always easier to do it yourself.* Small team equals less collateral. And if he picks up his phone, he knows he's gonna get to his cloud and slip through old photos. He doesn't need to see Hanzo's face right now. He doesn't need to think about how glorious it would be if Hanzo were sitting in the stool next to him right now, helping him. Rubbing his shoulder, like he did that one time. Getting loose and smirky with drink.

Cole squashes his cigarette and lets the liquor speak again: *it'll be alright, cowboy. Ain't it always? You move on, you meet new people, see new sights. No need to look back. It'll all be just fine. You'll come back from this.*

Outside, the guitarist switches to something saccharine, makes the gunslinger slump all the way to his arm. The milky light and his own swimming vision make the up-close wood grain seem permeable, faveolate. Like that Gibraltan beach he felt like he was sinking into; millions of particles of sand coalescing into one infinitely detailed whole. Ocean waves and low, raspy laughter start rolling through his head, threatening to block out the guitar, the holovid, everything. *That's alright* -- been a long time since he had the good sense to black out.

He closes his eyes as the liquor still running through that dogged refrain: *it'll be alright, it'll be just fine, it'll all be al--*

"¿Qué onda?"

Cole lifts his eyes up. The woman from the far end of the bar is now at his side, poking up the brim of his hat like she's examining the underside of a big rock.

It hurts to keep his eyes open. He barely takes in her wicked smirk; the glowing ridges along her half-shaved skull; the cyberpunk attire atop a petite, curvy silhouette. But he sees enough to form a conclusion: *trouble.*

He lowers his head again. *"Nada."*

Then she slides into the stool to his right, facing out with neatly crossed legs. Long nails rapping on the bar's edge. Her Spanish comes smooth -- definitely a local -- but she switches to English just as easily, clearly pinning Cole as exactly what he is: a half- *gringo* with no living roots in this land. None that he knows of, anyway.

“Anyone ever tell you you look like Luis Miguel with a beard?”

Cole forces himself to get a better look. Ultra-violet eyes, cybernetics, hair, clothes. This gal really loves her purple. A bit obsessive, maybe. Someone who knows what they’re about and never leaves room for anything less.

Definitely trouble.

"Don’t look nothin’ like Luis,” he grumbles from behind his metal arm.

"Maybe it’s just the eyes.” The woman leans to the side, makes a straight ‘L’ with one hand and lines it up with Cole’s drooping mug. One eye squeezed shut. “Kinda squinty? Sad old frown?”

He snorts. “S’just the liquor. Been a rough few…” Cole tries to add it up, finds himself counting back too far, settles with something easy: “weeks.”

"I hear you, *wey* .” She tosses her dyed ends over her shoulder, affects a high-pitched sigh, “I’ve had it hard, too. I mean, my job is pretty hard all the time. And you wouldn’t believe the characters I have to deal with, *Dios mio.* But I also kinda love it, you know? Like, a few weeks ago, I was on this train to Hong Kong,” she folds those long nails together with delight, re-crosses her legs, as if settling into a juicy story with a dear old friend, “And I was pretending to be this Turkish archaeologist so I could chat up this tasty older man, *él era muy fresa, ¿verdad?* Get his details. Learn where he was going, what he was planning. Turns out he wasn’t planning much. But I got what I needed.”

Cole frowns from the darkness under his hat. “What’s that?”

The woman takes his hat entirely, flashes a thousand-watt smirk. *"Información, vaquero.* There’s nothing more powerful.”

Cole lifts himself up with a hoarse grunt. He gets just enough lift to plant his elbows on the counter and his hand on the *tequila.* If she’s determined to flirt, he’s going to need another shot. “Want a drink, miss --?”

“Oh, just Sombra's fine.”

Cole’s hand tightens on the bottle’s neck.

"Although,” she toys with the lining of his hat, as if poking around for something, “‘Miss Sombra’ does roll off the tongue. And no, thanks, I’ve had enough of this place's swill to last a lifetime.”

He keeps a steady gaze as he pours himself a much smaller portion than he’d originally intended as Sombra conjures a flattened square of violet light in midair, sparkling and bright. She adjusts the hat just so and then strikes a pose. A small clicking noise, and a flash blinks over the gunslinger's dumbfounded expression -- she’s taking a selfie. Then the camera vanishes with a wave of her hand.

Cole prides himself on his ability to blend in and disappear. Since before he could grow hair anywhere other than his head, he's dodged the law a hundred times in a hundred different ways. He's gone underground without a trace, lived right under the noses of his enemies, and then resurfaced years later with all new stories and no new scars.

But, right now, in the presence of this world-renowned hacker, he's fairly confident that not a-one of that matters. If he's not careful, this could be his very last drink.

He slowly raises the glass to his lips, keeps his eyes straight ahead, and prays he hasn't already drowned his last remaining wit.

"Always thought you were a bunch'a dudes."

She smirks, puts his hat back on his head. "Most 'dudes' do."

Cole straightens it. "Guess you think you got something I'd be interested in." He looks at her, the shadow of his brim keeping his eyes cool. "Christmas present?"

"Mm, maybe so. Have you been a good boy?" she winks. "I always know who's been naughty."

His jaw goes tight. "Guess that all depends on who you ask, but --"

"Relax, *vaquero.* I don't care about your bounty."

"Didn't think you did."

"Oh, no? Why *do* you think I'm here?" She leans her cheek on folded knuckles. "I'm, like, *dying* to learn."

"Tell you what," he sets down his drink, his patience already warring with his fatigue, "You tell me something worth hearing, and maybe I'll teach you something worth knowing."

"Aw," she brays, turning in her stool, tossing her attention up to the holovid. "I didn't peg you for a cut-to-the-chase kind of guy. The other one was much chattier than you... weirdly enough. Don't I get any of that famous southern hospitality?"

"Seeing as how we're in your neck of the woods," Cole reaches for another cigarette, "Seems like the burden of hospitality's on your shoulders, Miss Sombra."

Sombra laughs, a short and mean little chuckle. Then she angles towards him on her stool, turns their corner of the bar into their own private Idaho with just a few short movements. Even then, Cole can tell she's a fighter; most hackers he's met don't function well outside of a chair, but he can tell her body is capable of more than just getting her brain from point A to point B.

"You're right, Cassidy. *Casa ajena:* you don't touch a thing without say-so."

"What is it you think I'm so keen on touching?"

Another snicker. Every time she laughs, a warning light spins inside Cole's chest, but he's too old and too wise and too wary to lose his head now. Blackwatch was one long series of eleventh-hour upsets; a little bar meeting isn't enough to shake him. Besides -- the alcohol provides a pleasing buffer between the rattle of his survival instincts and the muscles in his face. She may be trouble, but so is he.

"LumériCo is a tough nut to crack, eh?"

"I've heard tell."

"My little run-in with them last summer made them tougher than ever." Sombra flutters her nails down, drawing pink light in the small space between them. Another flattened image appears: the first tour Cole went on in the LumeriCo facility. "Can't say I thought much of your disguise, but the surveillance cameras hardly noticed you at all. You're a good snoop. Well-trained."

"Tell me something I don't know, darlin'."

"Ay, that could take hours," Sombra sighs. She waves away the screen just before the bartender turns his head their way -- the hair on Cole's neck stands up. "But I will tell you this." She leans back, points one long nail to the counter, locks Cole with her gaze. "I care about my home. There are people here that mean something to me. You might have met a few." She taps just under her own left eye with a faux-sympathetic pout.

Cole squints through the bruise. "I reckon you mean something to them, too."

"Mi barrio. You might know about that."

He grunts, noncommittal. She's groping for a button to push; he can't show even one.

"That's why I'm here, Cassidy." She waves one magnanimous hand. "To lend you my professional help. Seems like you could use it." She lifts his bottle just enough to make it slosh. "I can't help you with this, though. Heh," and then she does a pretty spot-on impression of Angela's Swiss accent: "'I'm not a miracle worker.'"

And that makes the gunslinger's eyes go black. This is the moment he leaves. Right now -- this is when he gets up and stumbles out. This is the moment he realizes that a snake pit is opening up before him and that even one more step will have him tumbling down into more poison than even his skill can contend with.

But a small voice keeps him still. It says, *hang on a bit longer.* Like the feeling he gets at the roulette table that tells him he's just one more hand from winning the house.

He shrugs, adjusts his serape, and drawls, "Unless you can help me bust into LumériCo and steal something I don't even know about, I'm afraid you've wasted all your good Christian generosity."

"Would it be better if I told you what it is, and *then* helped you break in and steal it?"

He gives her a skeptical brow, then takes out the cigarette from between his lips. He taps it against the ashtray, hums low. Tries not to show his hand. ”I’m listening.”

Then she creates that private space between them again. “Do you know anything about nanotechnology?”

"Nope.”

“Nanites were all the rage just a decade ago. But now, nobody talks about them anymore.” She leans in again, resumes their conspiratorial intimacy. “Ask me why.”

He stares at her with half-lidded eyes. Slowly licks his teeth. “No.”

She talks over him, “Because that’s what makes a war cold. There’s a new kind of arms-race going on, but it’s too small for the media to see. Too small for human eyes, actually.”

Then Sombra expands the pressed tips of her index and thumb, spreading out a tiny image: a simple box with a triangle Play button in the center. She taps it, and it starts vibrating between them like a jumping stereo system.

Cole can just make out two hoarse male voices, both speaking Spanish:

>>The most recent batch isn’t working. We’ll need something faster.

<<Uhh, there is nothing faster, Marco. Nanite transmutation is still bound by the laws of physics. We’ve already pulled ten hours. Can’t we pass it off to second team?

>>Boss wants this by 0200. You think I haven’t asked for more time already? You know what he said? ‘I don’t care what it takes. Get it done.’ You know there’s still people standing in line to do what you do. He’ll change your whole team before he changes the deadline.

<<God. Fine. Then he won’t care if I re-route half the engineers from R&D to work through the holidays?

>>He’d shake your hand. Now hush. Not supposed to be discussing this shit above level.

The projection vanishes and Cole squints at Sombra. Keeps the same laconic drawl: “funny stuff.”

"Nanite transmutation means calculation speed ten times faster than the technology we have now,” says Sombra, suddenly sharp, vibrant -- a cutting merge of natural charm and deadly competence that not-so-humbly reminds Cole of himself. “It means synergistic self-replicating. It means microcyborg computations,” and here she waves more pink light, ”And intracellular capabilities. We’re on the crest of a nanotechnologic second wave, and LumériCo is not going to be left behind.”

"And what's all that got to do with *mi barrio?"*

Now her eyes are flints, which *really* reminds Cole of himself. "You know all about LumériCo's corruption. Their crimes against this country. Portero has to go down for good, and the technology stored away in Special Projects is exactly the sort of thing they can't afford to lose."

"And that is?"

"I have no idea."

Cole snorts. "You just said you'd tell me what it is."

"Uh, yeah, and I literally just did?" She calls up the audio file again, taps it for emphasis. "Something to do with nanite transmutation?" It disappears again. "I didn't say I knew *exactly* how the technology is being implemented. I only know that the Viper King himself wants it ready before their new facility in Tijuana goes live, and that, *wey* , is reason enough to clean them out."

Cole gives her a dry look and calls the bartender over. He orders the last of the coffee while watching the way she passes the old man a slow smile and a knowing wink. The bartender smiles back. Fond, paternal even. Does he know who she is?

"You stole from them once on your own," the gunslinger mumbles. "Why you need me?"

"Si, si, I could do it without you, easy," Sombra drawls, waving him away. "But this is hardware. Hardware locked deep underground in a special division lab. I've run simulations for days -- it's a two-person job to get in and out without a trace."

She probably figured out more in a couple of hours than Cole'd been able to discover in weeks. "Why --?"

"Because if LumeriCo knows I broke in again -- and now, they will assume it was me no matter what -- they will come down hard on the whole community. They know I have allies here, that I am sheltered. I cannot let that happen. The revolution must go on."

Now she *really* sounds like him, only a younger, more ardent version. His eyes narrow -- could that be her angle? Mimic what she thinks that *he* thinks about himself in order to get on his good side? Tempt him with a reflection of the man he wants to be?

Cole takes up the mug of coffee before the bartender has a chance to set it down, sips it before it's cooled. "I don't suppose you'd offer me anything in the way of a guarantee?"

Sombra grins, mimics his accent: "wanna 'shake on it?'"

He looks down at her nails. "Don't reckon I do."

"But you'll take the job," she sing-songs.

"Makes you say that?"

"You wouldn't have ordered coffee if you didn't."

Cole sips slower to spite her. "Maybe I just wanna be alert for when you stab me in the back."

Sombra chuckles. "Too messy. But, if you're really not interested, I could find always some other *vaquero* with too much time on his hands. I only thought I'd offer my services as a favor to you, seeing as how we're after the same thing. But, like -- I'm not in a rush. You, on the other hand…" She feigns concern, doesn't seem to care how heavily it contrasts with all her previous good acting, "How long do you think you can stay here before the *pinche hura* make it too hard to pick up a pack of smokes? Before the bounty hunters roll in?"

Now is the moment to walk out. He stares past the holovid, thoughts racing as he nurses the coffee, but it's hard to make contingency plans when he can't take a single thing she's said as fact. He can't even be sure she actually does want his help, and doesn't just want a good opportunity to frame him, or to watch his body tumble into a nuclear reactor. There's something computational about the way she looks at him: probing, looking for which commands will execute certain functions, but always hiding. Even when she turns her head to ask the bartender for her own cup of coffee, smiling sweetly, using his first name, Cole can tell there's no real emotion behind it. He can see the glowing device embedded into the spine of her jacket and it makes him wonder just how much of her is still human.

Certainly, she knows far more about him than he realizes. Certainly she's capable enough to have watched him since Gibraltar. Certainly it's no far stretch that she could be working for Talon right now, that she's even the very hacker that infiltrated Athena's firewalls right before they got hit.

But if she is working for Talon, he doubts they would order her to work with himself. Not when he's picked off so many of their goons over the year. Not when they have a huge roster of skilled mercenaries, all capable of playing Sombra's sidekick. Why him? And why ask so nicely, with such well-crafted duplicitousness? Certainly, he's exceptionally good at what he does, but why not simply use blackmail?

Then, as he watches her take her coffee from the bartender, making him laugh with just a few words of Spanish, Cole comes to an entirely different idea: maybe she just thinks it'd be *funny* . People who spend more time in front of machines than human eyes certainly can develop a strange sense of humor, a lack of empathy. And she's powerful enough to play with lives like it's all a big game. Probably gets bored doing anything less, at this point.

Are you sure that life isn't a game? Hana's words zoom back into his head as her smiling face reappears on the screen -- the bartender has switched the holovid to her Christmas special.

Sombra hacks his thoughts: "clock's ticking, *amigo.* " Blows on her coffee.

But Cole isn't listening anymore. His swimming eyes are on the muted screen, where Hana has just introduced Lúcio on her set, both of them chatting joyously. Neither of them would ever accept a deal like this from someone like Sombra. He can just picture Hana's indignant little face at the mere suggestion. Lúcio might be a harder sell -- fellow revolutionary and all -- but he'd still probably wind up trying to turn her in.

But the gunslinger is not Lúcio, and he is definitely not Hana. The metal on his hip has seen more evil than both of them combined, and there's nothing to indicate that's going to change anytime soon. Through Deadlock, Blackwatch and through all his bounty hunting days, he's tried to do right and the wrong has always caught up with him anyway. Someone so good with a gun should never hope for a future without one. Pike knew that.

Even Ana knew that. Would she take this job?

If it meant taking it away from someone else, someone potentially worse. Someone who might put even more people in danger. If it meant she could keep an eye on the enemy.

Would Gabe? If it meant getting exactly what he wanted.

Jack?

Cole sets down his coffee. *Let's leave Jack out of this equation,* says the liquor.

He leaves money on the counter and rises, putting a little weight into his sway, adding a slur to his Spanish: "ehh… *estoy bien pedo* …"

Sombra smirks. "I'm sure your aim is still the best in the city."

"Let's hope so, darlin'. Speaking of the city," he eyes her up and down, gives her a showy grin, "You wanna go for a little ride after the robbery? See the sights? I heard there's a mighty fine view of the sea from my motel's roof."

Sombra raises one brow and lets out a surprised, low cackle. Slips off her stool like a fish. "You've woken up robbed blind and tied to a bed before, haven't you?"

Cole smiles, feeling oddly free; the easy adrenaline of the gambler. "Naw. Was a radiator."

She mimes a laugh, but no sound escapes. Just a soft curl of her lips, a quick wink, and then she's leading him out the door -- her most honest performance yet.

Definitely trouble. But Cole's been trouble all his life. And even with all her intel, he's liable to have a couple cards up his sleeve she hasn't seen yet.

Still playing the part of the reckless drunken cowboy, he flirtatiously suggests that they'd best blend in better if they pretended to be just another drunk couple. Sombra agrees and together they traipse and stumble and laugh across town. She laughs so hard that she snorts; he stumbles so much that she winds up half-holding him up. A few older couples smile knowingly as she loudly recalls a hilarious story from when she was a child, when she and her pals tried to rob the bakery. Cole doesn't think for one second that any of it is true, but it hardly matters; they get through the city quickly and without much notice.

Once or twice, Cole swears he sees a look of recognition come over some of the faces they pass, but there's nothing he can only use the information to plan ahead; if he tries anything, he'll have to try it while they're still inside. She's got friends out here.

LumériCo's underbelly is much darker than its topside. After the first four levels, only small proximity bulbs guide their way, flicking on as soon as they get close -- it spooks Cole the first time it happens, making Sombra laugh. Every ball of glowing cyan has to get through a dry mist, cool and chemical, smelling like rain with just a touch of paint thinner. The first few sub-levels are easy enough to pass, but Cole keeps Peacekeeper raised and his eye on the hacker the whole way. He does what she tells him to do, moves where she tells him to move. Tones down the flirting but keeps an eye on her computations -- not that it helps one iota. She seems to be running a system she designed from the ground up, totally cryptic. Her own personal hieroglyphics.

There's not much opportunity for observation anyway. At the fifth level, the automated security gets tighter. Sombra takes them onto a path not meant for human accessibility and everything gets even darker. The turquoise lights from Cole's arm and chest and gun glow as bright as the ultraviolet splash of Sombra's cybernetics. Everything starts to smell acrid, electrical -- traces of iodine, which makes Cole feel like he's in a hospital. Semi-translucent walls and shimmering ports create a landscape so alien to the terra-cotta roof tiles of the small town miles above their heads that it makes Cole wonder, not for the first time, if they've stepped into another dimension altogether. The distant sound of regulated, xylophone-like beeps is the only thing that keeps him grounded in the real world, and even those sound strange and faraway.

"Over here."

Sombra's whisper echoes like a drop of water in a cave. She drags her nails over a console and the circuitry talks back. He hears something like a hastening wind chime, and then a hardlight path ripples out over a huge field of steaming pipes. For all the violence her little Glock inspires, Cole can't imagine she'd ever have need of it, what with the wizardry she wields. They move like the machines themselves salute their passing, stepping onto a drone that carries them over an endless pit of blinking cyan lights, where countless droning behemoths create clean energy for all of Mexico. The gunslinger and the hacker, each clinging to the central propeller, each looking down with a distinct lack of awe. From somewhere far below, in the dry, metallic haze, more lights flicker on, as if something is looking back.

When the drone stops short, they both have to make a jump for it. Cole jumps too far and has to duck into a roll, but Sombra leaps and lands like a ballet dancer. She smiles when she catches him looking, pats his chest, and walks on.

"Just one more level."

Cole steps aside graciously, gestures with Peacekeeper: "after you."

Special Projects is simpler than he expected. Smaller, too. But then, he thinks, *Dummy -- of course it's small*. How much space do you need for a nanotechnology lab?

Sombra strides right up to one of the consoles and starts tapping away while Cole scans. The service lights cast a bleary glow over lab desks, robotic arms, servers and microcircuitry stations -- all unearthly still, yet with the promise of movement. Coffee cups half-full, papers everywhere. Reminds Cole a little of Winston's lab, though ten times more alien to his sensibilities. This is a place meant for no one but the specialized minds who built it, and once its task is complete, he imagines it'll be transfigured into something else. The wave never stops.

"Here we go."

Cole turns to see a puff of gas as a mechanized wall turns in ten places. Pieces shift and stretch like metallic tissue where before was only seamless plane. It flows apart and a single translucent rack emerges, four rows each holding three small containers, each bearing the LumériCo logo. *No bigger than a cat carrier* , Cole recalls Pike saying. Free for anyone to simply pick up one up and walk right out.

"Well, I reckon that's far enough."

Sombra slowly turns to let her eyes fall on Peacekeeper's raised barrel. She scoffs and chuckles at the same time. "A double-cross? Not very heroic, Cassidy."

"Now, darlin'," Cole hums, "You know as well as I do that it's no crime in double-crossing a known double-crosser. That's just good common sense."

She tuts, puts her hands on her hips. "Morrison is turning in his grave."

"That's a fact, Miss Sombra. Slide the gun over, if you don't mind. Then put those hands back up. If I see even a hint of purple, you can consider that your final task on this earth."

He keeps the gun pointed as she plucks up her Glock and slides it across the floor. He picks it up and puts it in his own holster. Then he walks around her, plucks up one of the crates and places it on one of the central desks.

Sombra sighs. "I would've let you take one, *pendejo.* "

He keeps her in his line of sight as his metal hand feels around the edges. "I ain't doing this just for a clean getaway."

Another sigh, this one more frustrated. "What then?"

"I know you know what these can do. So spill the beans."

"Like I said -- *información.* "

"How so?"

"Download-and-die." Sombra moves and Peacekeeper's hammer clicks, so she just rolls her eyes and stays put. "Just one of these nanite-drives can wirelessly attach to any server in a twenty-yard perimeter, download everything in under twenty seconds, then wipe the remaining data so that no one else can get to it." She looks up and off, smiling, then softly cackling. "You want to hear something really funny? I think they designed it because of *me.* In case I break into their system to steal again, so they can wipe-and-run on any network. Aha!" She leans on one hip, shakes her head. "I'm, like, winning an arms race. So weird."

Cole finds what he's looking for -- a latch along a seam. He presses it, and reveals an even smaller cube inside the crate: complex, ridged, dark. Like it was made of meteorite, but delicate, as if it held nothing but feathers. Hardy, yet refined. It reminds him of some of the best tech he's ever seen, the stuff that, even just visually, kind of blew his mind a little. Like Genji's later cybernetics. Like Tracer's chronal-accelerator.

"You got some purpose in mind for these already."

She shrugs, raps her nails gently across her cheek, eyes to the ceiling. "Not really. Although, you know… I have a lot of friends." Her brows lower, and she gives him her most honest smile of the night. "I'm sure one of them could use it."

Cole glowers. "Move it, *chica.* I've had enough."

"That's so weird -- I was just thinking the same thing."

Then she vanishes.

Cole's gunshot echoes off the metal wall behind where her head used to be. He whirls, steps so the console covers his back, listens for footsteps or breathing. By the time he catches a sign, it's too late.

One of the robotic arms swings down like a battering ram and knocks him into the wall. He feels his skull strike hard, he struggles forward, then falls over a desk and collapses. The cube skids across the floor, intact. Red alarm screeches through the entire level. He retains just enough sight to witness Sombra pluck her own crate from the rack, turn towards him, and give a wave with her fluttering nails.

"Adios, vaquero."

The rattling is what wakes him. Bad dreams make him thrash, they always have -- herds of skull-faced horses, thunder over the mesas -- then it's bright morning light and the ceiling of his dingy motel. A thundercloud morphs into a patch of mold, galloping hooves turn to the rumble of hovercars passing the alley under the window, and a childhood fear of storms becomes the pounding headache of a post- *tequila* bender. Another thrash, and the thunder turns into the abrasive clash of metal-on-metal. He looks up to see his wrists handcuffed to the iron frame of his motel bed.

Handcuffs meant for omnics -- only removable by its corresponding key. Cole has tools to shut down their hardlight locks, but they're in his satchel. Which is on the desk. Across the room.

He lifts his head as much as he can to look around. It's still early in the morning -- the light is still young and the neighbor's chickens are still clucking outside his open window. The smell of frying *tortillas* and fresh coffee permeate the wood of his door. He looks to the other side, where he thankfully sees his gun and holster on the desk, seemingly intact. His serape is draped over the chair, along with his chaps and boots. And his shirt. And his jeans.

He looks down; at least she had the decency to leave him with his boxers.

Chapter End Notes

A film nod: when Cole says, 'Thought you were a bunch of dudes,' and Sombra says, 'Most dudes do,' it's echoing the Matrix, when Trinity first meets Neo. Felt like it was appropriate BEFORE I realized that Sombra actually has this line in game: "I know kung fu."

NEXT UP -- we'll pop right back into the room Sombra left him in, where hopefully he's come up with a plan.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

As Hanzo and Cole continue their trek towards Watchpoint: New York, we learn more about what Cole's been up to since Gibraltar.

Chapter Notes

omg I am so glad to be posting this chapter. I hope you guys like it—I've been looking forward to this one for a long time! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cole pulls hard on the handcuffs. His body thumps the mattress heavy. His metal arm budges the metal headboard a tad, but he can't do more without hurting his other wrist. The chickens outside don't react to his commotion, just go about their business like gossipy onlookers -- *cluck cluck, rough luck*. Maybe don't take jobs with Talon operatives next time. Maybe don't make big decisions when you're shit-faced next time. Maybe come up with a better get-out plan than point your gun and look mean and hope your criminal counterpart can't just *vanish* before your very eyes next time.

Don't kid yourself, a rough voice mutters, sounding like Gabe. *No more next time for you. Authorities are gonna be dogging you from here to Madagascar after that little stunt. Pack up. Get out of Dodge. Put yourself down a fox hole and stay there 'til spring.*

Cole drops his head on the pillow. He bares his teeth at the ceiling, crushes his eyes into a glare. The old litanies come back all at once, like the breaking of a dam: *you fucked up, you fuck up, you fucked up, you --*

But right before he drowns, a flash of phosphorescent black metal catches his eye. A flutter beside the window. He blinks rapidly until some moisture accumulates. The window drapes flutter, and then he sees it.

The little LumériCo drive. A white sugar skull spray-painted on its side like a Christmas bow.

He blinks a bit more to make sure he hasn't just fallen into exceptionally powerful wishful thinking. The questions swarm before he's sure: why would she give him what he wanted? Why let him live at all? Sombra could've handed him to the omnic guards and made out with her prize much more easily, even if she did have some kind of trick to lug his dead weight

out. It doesn't match the profile he built for her in his mind. Though, he has to remind himself -- tequila makes even the sharpest eyes unreliable.

Then, on the opposite side of the room from the cube, a trilling noise and a deep buzz sounds from his satchel, makes him jump inside his cuffs.

After a moment, he recognizes the tone: a text from Fareeha. Fareeha Amari, who's supposed to be in Canada with her father. Who never contacts him even when she doesn't have a full schedule, which is also never. Who prefers to call, always, and wouldn't send a text unless it was something she wanted to be careful about. And when Fareeha wants to be careful, that means it's serious.

Cole's chest burns ten degrees hotter. Considering his present situation and the fact that LumériCo is now definitely aware of not one but two missing nano-drives, he feels justified in resorting to drastic measures. Thank Christ the button on his boxers is closed.

"HEY! *Ayuda! Ayuda, apúrate!"*

He yells his head off, rattling the cuffs against the annoyingly sturdy bed frame, until his door slams open and a harried housekeeper raises a baseball bat. Seeing Cole, she gasps and drops it. Slaps her hands to her mouth.

His words rush out in Spanish: "please don't scream! Please, don't scream, miss."

She doesn't scream, but she doesn't exactly rush to his aid either. She closes the door behind her, as if afraid someone else will walk by and get the wrong idea.

Encouraged, Cole presses on as gently and quickly as he can: "was my own damn fault, trust me. Ain't nothin' you gotta worry about. I just need two things in that satchel over there and I can pop these off and get outta your hair. Could you bring it to me? Please?"

She only moves to pick up her bat, then eyes him suspiciously. Poses like she still might take a swing.

"Please, miss. I can get gone if you'd just please hand me my things. *Big* damn tip in it for you if you do, I swear. Please?"

Slowly, surely, the housekeeper moves. She walks to the desk with her eyes locked on Cole and the bat clutched tight. The chickens cluck mildly on their roof nextdoor. *Must be used to sudden noises,* he thinks. *Knew this was a rough neighborhood.* He can tell she's swung that bat before just from the way she holds it.

The housekeeper lifts the satchel and then steadily approaches his side, holding it like it might contain a bomb. Then she drops it carefully by his hip and steps away, glancing from it to Cole's uneasy smile.

"Thank you kindly, miss. Now, there's a long, silver, hook-shaped thing in the brown case near the bottom. Put it in my good hand, if you please."

She opens the satchel as wide as she possibly can before pulling out the specified device as one might handle plutonium. She places it in Cole's hand and, again, steps back. Eyes him with a little less venom.

Cole jerks the handle, the device beeps thrice, and the handcuffs loosen and fall off. He hides it before he even pulls the sheets over his lap, not wanting to attract attention to the most illegal item on his person. Then he digs into his bag and offers the woman a wad of crumpled cash.

She doesn't move. Her jaw is still tight. Cole can tell she's more concerned that this is all a trap of some kind rather than just a bizarre cry for help. He knows he has the look and feel of an experienced con-man.

Luckily, Cole is a good enough con-man to press the envelope. He looks her right in the eye, gives her his warmest smile yet and leaves it on the edge of the bed closest to her. "I'd be mighty appreciative if you'd keep this entire 'lil encounter between us, my friend. Think you can do that? Our secret?" He speaks slowly like he knows people like, flashes a little teeth. If he laid it on any thicker, he'd slip right off the bed.

She goes a little red, thank God. Then she nods, takes up the cash and maneuvers back towards the door. Cole watches her with a waning smile. Her lack of verbal response makes him uneasy, but maybe she's just that unflappable. Like the chickens.

But after she stops at the door, and after she gives him one last (appreciative) glance, he sees her eyes dart towards the sugar skull painted on the LuméríCo cube.

Then she clicks the door shut, leaving Cole alone to wonder just how many friends Sombra has in this city.

He opens Fareeha's message only to find that it's in code -- the same code they invented while they were both studying cryptography in Overwatch's continued education program. It warms his heart to see it, makes him flashback to that back corner row in HQ's meeting room 1502. Fareeha wouldn't let him sit next to her -- deemed him too distracting -- but delighted in utilizing their homework to surreptitiously pass notes back and forth. They were so proud when the day finally came that their poor instructor could not readily decipher what they'd exchanged.

It's been awhile, so it takes him a few minutes to figure it out. But then he reads:

Saw you on the news. My team here has been handed something interesting.

I need your help and it seems like you could use an overseas vacation.

Come to these coordinates in three days at 2200.

Thanks.

—F.A.

Cole doesn't waste a second. As soon as he's absorbed the text, he leaps from bed and starts yanking on clothes. His former panic immediately transforms into a full-body exhilaration that gets him moving for the door and hopping down the stairs like he's got motors in his spurs. Fareeha's message has to be related to his run-in with LumériCo -- there's no way it's not. The timing's too perfect. And she wouldn't ask his help for just anything old thing. She wouldn't say 'Thanks' like that, like there's no option of him refusing, if it wasn't important. Sure-footed, by-the-books Amari Junior has run into something big and Cole Cassidy is gonna answer the hawk's call.

The heist wasn't a total disaster. He can still turn this thing around. One more second chance. A post-Christmas hangover fades in a bright Mexico morning.

Once he's on the street, he sends Fareeha a confirmation, then crushes his cell and tosses it into a random public trash can. He'll have to really disappear this time. Make like a fart in the wind. Call in all his favors, pull out all the stops. Make absolutely sure that not even Sombra herself can catch a whiff of his whereabouts. He'll have to see a couple old friends, specialists who can make sure she didn't do something foolish, like leave a tracker on him. Or, he thinks with residual rage, dare to mess with his gun. It'll be pricey, but money's no object. Not anymore. Not when he can feel the end of the road finally rising to meet him.

He can hear the handcuffs rattling atop the LumériCo cube at the bottom of his satchel. If they pass the inspection, he thinks he'll keep them. Never know when a good pair of cuffs can come in handy.

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Another shot rings out over the vast, snow-covered avenue. Two killers duck for cover against the discarded carcass of a lopsided food truck. From somewhere far away, a man yells, and another answers, and for a second Cole flashes back to a Deadlock raid, one in which he and several other boys jumped a sixteen-pad-hovercraft on a twenty-mile stretch of road between Santa Fe and La Cueva. Desert dwellers -- outcast survivalists from the Crisis -- sprouted like cacti all across the scrub and tried to make off with their haul like so many starving coyotes. Summoned from the dust by Deadlock's peppering semi-automatics, hollering from all sides in the black.

“Hey now!” Cole slides to his knees and presses his shoulder to the food truck. He reads ‘Flamin’ Jin’s Hawaiian Tacos!’ right before Hanzo crouches before him, a dark blue slash against the neon rainbow paint. “Just passing through -- don’t want no trouble!”

The archer leans to look through a blast-hole in the truck’s side so he can see through the slide-window on the other. “If they were more skilled, you would be dead by now.”

“I can talk ‘em down.”

“You cannot ‘talk down’ your own would-be murderer.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time if I did,” Cole mutters. He leans forward to give the Deadeye a better view. There’s a flatiron-style building at the far end of the street, looming and unobscured, but Cole can’t make out anything through its windows. Hard to see what’s under the shadows in a high noon sun. “We got no business with you fine folk -- just passing through!”

A wide silence. Cole can’t hear more than Hanzo’s steady breathing, the breeze between alleyways and his own fluttering heart. It’s been a long time since he had to attempt negotiations whilst in no position to be making negotiations.

Then, a hoarse call echoes down the avenue valley: “who are you?”

“Just two wayward evangelists on our way to find Christ somewhere out West! We’ve had a long go of it, praise his name, so we ain’t looking for any more problems just now!”

He looks at Hanzo, who is giving his driest expression yet. “I’d wager they’re up in that corner joint.”

“That is where I would be,” drawls Hanzo, as if he is taking this all with the same resigned exasperation he demonstrated that morning, when Cole decided to wear his red serape over the black suit.

“You’re armed!” The shouting voice is high, raspy -- tinged with desperation. “You’re armed and you’re dressed for combat! Tell us why you’re here!”

“I told you! We’re just a couple’a lost souls searching for God on the other side of the --”

Rifle bullets ring against the side of the truck. Cole can see the indents in the steel -- *nice grouping* . Maybe they let someone else shoot this time.

He grunts and shuffles closer to the ground, practically laying on the snow, peeking just enough through the truck for the light to strike the Deadeye. But it’s too far off. If he’s not close enough to know in the pit of his gut that what he’s seeing is a human being, it’s too far off.

“Last time!” Now the voice is shrill, caked with anger, hoarse from yelling so loudly. “Who are you?!”

“Waylaid ministers spreading the good word to all who --”

Another tight spray of bullets. Hanzo growls beside him.

“Alright, alright! We’re bounty hunters! We’ve come to save the Watchpoint!”

More silence. Cole looks and sees Hanzo shaking his head.

Then a hail of gunfire shatters upon the bus in the erratic orchestra of assault rifles.

Hanzo swears in Japanese, seizes Cole’s arm, and yanks him into a run: “come on!”

Cole gets his boots under him and hauls after. The bullets stutter up the street, wildly inaccurate for their distance, but still pattering at Cole’s flashing spurs like a timpani of hail. Hanzo’s method of dodging seems to be to go where none can follow, like his brother; Cole is almost blinded by the sun’s reflection off the archer’s leg enhancements as he runs up frost-caked pipes and climbs icy paneling. Darting across rooftops like he’s got wings in his heels, a dark blur against light blue, pausing only to let more arrows fly. The gunslinger hears one of them scatter, striking at least one man, a blood-curdling shout -- in that echoing snow-globe of an avenue, every sound carries for miles.

As they race down a side-street, cutting off the tower’s line of sight, Cole hears more voice-cracking war-cries echo through the urban canyons like conversing hounds; the neighbors are waking up.

Bizarrely, Hanzo looks down just as Cole looks up. The archer uses the moment to either goad or encourage, Cole can’t tell which: “keep up, gunslinger!”

But it’s unnecessary because, as Hanzo must quickly realize, Cole Cassidy hauls ass when he has to. His boots have no traction and his chaps aren’t exactly made for sprinting, but he dodges with a preternatural sense of where bullets are coming from. He knows their trajectories like he knows where his feet will land. He runs half-backwards just to get in some cover fire whenever Hanzo has to make a particularly wild jump, ducks the return-fire with a grace abnormal in a man of his size. Then he spins and keeps going, breath huffing, red serape trailing, reloading even as his eyes beg for an exit strategy.

Then he hears a shout and a crash: Hanzo’s stumble.

Cole’s heart rushes to his throat as his feet make double-time toward the source of his fall. Suddenly, even the adrenaline isn’t helping. *Is he shot? Is he hurt? Should I call out his name?*

But by the time he whirls around the corner and comes upon him in a tiny apartment courtyard, Hanzo is already up and brushing bits of decayed wood off his arms; scratched and disgruntled, like one of the alley cats, but fine. Cole’s heart slowly climbs down from its ledge.

Then a shot rings out over their exit, forcing them both against the wall. Cole unloads a few rounds at the gate and the shots stop. Both men breathe hard, wait for more, but no one presses the attack.

But it's only because they don't have to -- Hanzo and Cole are stuck there. For all intents and purposes: sitting ducks.

"Must be dozens of these fuckers from here to the bridge," Cole growls, reloading. "Gonna be popping up every which way, the whole way."

"We will have a difficult time simply evading them like this," Hanzo mutters, three arrows between his fingers.

"You alright?"

"Yes."

"Y'sure?"

"Yes ," Hanzo hisses, not looking at him, pupils vibrating at something past the physical world. "My eyes are… recovering from an injury. It will not happen again."

Cole looks up from Hanzo's tight fingers, to his arm, to the pulse jumping over his left temple and thinks about how weaker Hanzo looked in Numbani from the first moment he saw him in Gibraltar. It speaks volumes that it's hard for Cole to imagine Hanzo in visible physical pain, let alone nursing a lasting injury. He wonders if that's why he's let Cole be the point-man on this mission. He wonders how hard that is for him, to give up control.

But even with dark circles and a nose-dive through a patch of rotting wood, Hanzo looks like a vicious vision. Sweat on his brow, muscles tense, breath rapid. Face locked in the calm yet hyper-aware mask of total mastery. Cole heard how many pursuers he put down, would never admit to the feeling it gave him -- the feeling it's *giving* him. He may have changed his mind about many aspects of Hanzo Shimada, but he'd never changed his mind about this: the man's a hard-cut, mean-mugged, unstoppable killing machine.

Then Hanzo looks back at Cole and the gunslinger wonders if he really is as mean as he looks, or if he's just that deep in concentration all the time; the face of a man constantly plagued by thought, by vigilance. No wonder he didn't trust anyone in Gibraltar.

Then Cole yanks himself back to the real world, pulls his eyes away from Hanzo's quizzical look, and happens to see a very immediate solution. "We'll jump."

Hanzo raises a brow. "Jump? Jump where?"

Cole nods to their right: "down there."

Hanzo follows his gaze out through a break in the fencing, between apartment buildings and across the street. More than fifty feet from their crouched position is a gaping hole where the sidewalk used to be, chewed-up bits of concrete like a blooming flower around its center. As if a subterranean explosion broke through the slab long ago.

It's impossible to see what's underneath, especially from their location, but a couple nearby poles with green spheres at their tops tell Hanzo exactly to what Cole is referring.

He turns back with a raised brow. “The subway.”

“Yes.”

“Iie.”

“Yeh? Yes?”

“ *Iie* means no, fool.”

Cole glares and pouts at the same time. “Why not? They’ll never follow.”

Hanzo’s eyes flicker to Cole’s mouth, then meet his frown again. “How could you possibly know that?”

“‘Cause they’ll be easy pickin’s if they jump down after us! It’d be like a goddamn shooting gallery.”

“Except that we do not know what is down there. What if it is too deep? What if it is caved-in? We will be diving blind into our own tiger pit.”

“Well, tiger, I have faith that we could find our way out again. And they reinforced those tunnels ages ago. So on the good chance that it *ain’t* caved-in nor a bottomless pit, we could make our escape, then follow the tracks all the way to the island.” Cole snaps shut Peacekeeper’s barrel and holds it at the ready. “How’s about thinking on the bright side for a change?”

But Hanzo only sets his jaw harder. Cole can see it flexing behind the skin. “These people live here. They know these systems better than we. They will track us easily.”

“Then they’d be funneling themselves into their own grave. Plus, we got C4. Could blow up a whole wall behind us if we needed to, make a neat ‘lil blockade.”

Hanzo echoes him in a low deadpan: “‘blow up a wall.’”

“Besides -- they’re scared. I know they’re scared. I can hear it. They don’t got it in ‘em to follow us. Not to where the omnics are. Now when we already put down a dozen of ‘em while running for our lives.”

“A dozen.”

“Eleven,” Cole cracks a wide coyote grin, “If we’re gettin’ exact.”

Hanzo looks at Cole in a way that Cole imagines he’d once looked at the yakuza that worked for him -- cool, lofty and unimpeachable. Someone who never had to raise his voice or say anything twice. But Cole meets his gaze like a man who doesn’t take orders anymore, who actually never did, but only ever followed his own principles as far as they would carry, who taps the ash from his cigar on any and all would-be superiors who think they know best.

Then he sees Hanzo's eyes dart for the adjacent side-street, where they can both hear the approaching locals.

"I can kill them all." Hanzo nocks all three arrows, coils like a panther, "I can do it. We needn't --"

"No . By now they've already gone for position. My way's better, 'n you know it."

Hanzo bares clenched teeth, hands flexing over his weapon.

The gunslinger makes sure his Stetson is secure on his head, licks the brim with his fingers. "It'll work." He dares a grin. "Trust me."

Hanzo huffs. He looks to the alley as if assessing angles and trajectories -- the only concession Cole knows he'll get.

Then they lock eyes, Hanzo growls low in his chest, and without speaking, they bolt through the broken fence and out into the street. Bullets miss them by inches. Snow splatters up in glittering sprays. Cole's serape expands like angel wings as Hanzo lets out a hoarse cry.

For the second time in as many days, they fall into black.

Both of them land with a roll: Hanzo into a low crouch on one side, Cole on the other. Both of them whirl at the edges of the light-patch and point their weapons skyward. Frozen, panting, ready to kill.

But none follow. A few echoing cries peter off as if making a retreat. Or to make for a different entrance to try to come up behind them like they did in the avenue.

Cole quietly maneuvers to Hanzo's side to tug on his sleeve. After a moment, Hanzo slowly backs up. Then they turn together to jog down the mouth of the subway, steel spurs and dragon-toes echoing in harmony.

"Ha! See? Too scared to follow."

"Luck."

"What's that now?"

Hanzo's face is a grim mask. "You were lucky. That is all."

Cole snorts. "That's a *lot* -- luck's got me into places others' never even got close to."

"And when it finally fails you?"

"Well, that train ain't here yet."

He can hear the arrow sliding into place on Hanzo's bow like the most airtight of rebukes. "If we are ambushed in this darkness, I will be sure to tell them how *lucky* you are."

They clip lights to their shoulders, but there's nothing worth seeing. Cole was right -- upgrades made shortly before the Crisis ensured the tunnels' basic integrity through omnic attacks and mass flooding -- but survival stopped there. Broken pipes like protruding veins drain into pools of water, thick as blood. Slimey ecosystems flourish in the dark. What rail tracks are visible over the decomposition are caked with rust. Cole notices a strange vinyl sheet hanging off the tiled walls, touches it curiously: a covering only meant to resemble real tile, like peeling skin. Cheaply held together, now readily falling apart. Cole never did like big cities.

A couple rats scuttle out of their light and into the walls, tiny feet echoing above and below. That, the sound of dripping water, Cole's own breath and the two men's metallic steps are all that reverberate in this forgotten place. He makes sure to stay quiet so that every single sound can be caught, interpreted. Judged as safe or otherwise.

That, and he thinks even one more comment might fracture Hanzo's already brittle self-control. The man walks with angry shoulders and a boiling aura. He may have gone along with Cole's plan, but displeasure is always easy to spot on the archer. He wants to do things his way. And he may try again soon.

The gunslinger grinds his jaw. On a mission through dark channels, avoiding detection, following an angry man through a place that smells of rot and damp -- it reminds him too much of Venice.

They walk for what feels like over an hour, carefully pushing past blockades and cautiously working past still-spitting wires before the tunnel opens into a station and Cole finally feels like he can take a breath without inviting whole colonies of microscopic life into his lungs. Two tracks run alongside a single concrete platform, which both men climb atop, eager to get away from the path of sewage. Cracks in the ceiling drip onto bowing plants that cover the rough skeleton of what used to be a wooden bench, streams of light making it look like something holy; a shrine set up for a god long-absent. Old kiosks show their age, decaying soda cans still sit in their coolers. Magazines congealed with mold.

Cole squints at one decayed sign. "What's that say?"

Hanzo doesn't look -- he's examining the stairs. "Indecipherable."

"Yeah," Cole sighs, holding up Peacekeeper as they walk. The platform stretches long, with more skeletal wooden benches ahead. "We'll head to the next station, look for a clearer sign."

“And why should the next station look any better? We should re-surface.”

“Ain’t no call to hop on up just yet. If I can stick it out in this nasty ‘lil rat den for another couple miles, so can you.”

“We are not safe here.”

“Ain’t so safe up top, neither. If you might recall.”

“I would *make* it safe.”

Cole grinds his jaw. The smell of wet earth and mold competes with the slick tang of rust, puts an unpleasantly acrid taste in his mouth. Makes him reach for a cigar. “This ain’t an assassination job, Shimada. Can’t just go around killin’ anything that gets in our way. These people got families.”

A low, exhausted sigh. “Everyone has families, Cassidy. It may not be an assassination job, but it is *our* job. Are you so ready to compromise the mission?”

Cole strikes his Elvis lighter and breaths out toxins. Now Venice is fully formed in his mind: Reyes in the dark, stoic and silent. Genji’s red eyes. The geneticist’s subtle smirk. A cornered target and a shotgun blast. Blackwatch doing the ‘real work’ of saving the world, one execution at a time.

He can feel the anger at the back of his throat, fresh as though it were yesterday and not eight dusty years ago. But he keeps his cool, as always. “We need the people on our side. Might not even get paid if you --”

Hanzo suddenly holds up a fist: halt and silence. Cole stops to listen.

Aside from the sporadic *drip, drip, drip* -- nothing.

“I heard something.” Hanzo slowly lowers his hand. *“Hn.”* He glares back at Cole as if it had never happened. “Why do you care for their lives? They tried to kill you.”

Cole snorts. “Not really.”

“They were aiming for your head.”

“Yeah, well. They missed.”

Hanzo jerks forward, swipes the hat off Cole’s head faster than the gunslinger can react. *“You have a hole in your hat.”*

Cole balks, gropes the brim and finds a small hole right on the edge. “Huh.” He pokes a finger through. Under his breath: “would you look at that.”

Then Cole once again has the opportunity of viewing Hanzo Shimada enraged. Not quite like the spitting anger in Numbani or all the drunken grousing on Gibraltar -- now it’s more like a cold simmering, like those deep sea volcanoes from the nature shows he used to watch as a

kid. It's just about the most intimidating thing Cole has ever seen, makes him think again of how he must've ruled the clan: that bottled threat of eruption. Something so obviously dangerous so ruthlessly controlled, like the dragon under his skin.

But the gunslinger has never had a normal reaction to danger. He replaces his hat on his head, licks the brim with his fingers. Adjusts his serape. "It's nothing."

"You are only delaying the inevitable."

"You don't know what's inevitable."

"Avoiding a harsh truth just so you can stick to your own misguided principles."

"Don't see the point when there are other options."

"Such as traversing this dark tunnel with no escape routes, the impending likelihood of a cave-in, and the high probability that we will experience a slow and agonizing death?"

"Goddamn, Shimada -- what happened to you since November? You got real black-spirited. Worse'n usual, I mean."

"And what happened to you? You have become soft." He looks Cassidy up and down, as if to imply the entirety of him. "Trying to be the noble agent of an organization you left long ago."

"Leave it, Hanzo."

"Their lapdog."

Now the gunslinger points right between the archer's eyes with the burning end of his cigar. "Rather be a dog than a fuckin' *snake* ."

Hanzo stalks forward, fast and without warning, and pins Cole to a creaking pillar. The cigar falls. The gunslinger huffs, straightens up under the iron bar of Hanzo's forearm, takes his bicep in metal fingers. Lets out a breathy, sinister chuckle that only enhances the angry glint of his eyes. Stormbow shakes in Hanzo's hand and then goes still.

Even six inches shorter, Hanzo makes his blood vibrate. Worse than when they were running from the scavengers. Worse than most of the dangerous situations he's been in before. But he still looks down with zero fear, lip curled over his canine, clenching Hanzo's bicep; they both know he could break the bone at any second. Another impasse in another cave.

If it hurts, Hanzo doesn't show it. "Think what you will of me, cowboy, but I have lived this long because I have done things *my* way, *by* myself. I do not work with anyone, let alone the flagrantly irresponsible. I am not going to compromise years of honed specialization just to accommodate your exaggerated sense of *luck* ."

Cole squints. "I'm more'n confident in your ability to watch your own back, Shimada."

Hanzo speaks through his clenched teeth: "and who is going to watch *yours* , fool?"

Then Cole freezes around an aborted laugh. The muscles in his face slacken as he searches Hanzo's. A blankness takes over.

Cole's instincts have always been good. He sees things without seeing them, feels the truth in his gut before anyone takes notice. Sometimes it gets him into trouble, sometimes it gets him out. Sometimes it helps him see past the masks of other, more intellect-forward types. Never have his instincts served him better than in understanding Hanzo Shimada. It's just about the only thing that works, though even then, he's been wrong more times than he'd care to count.

Hanzo's mask of stern discipline, what Cole recently discovered is concentration, now looks to have a desperate edge. What he previously took for suppressed anger now looks more like strain. Like the ache of responsibility -- something the gunslinger has seen many times before. On Gabriel. On Jack. Maybe even in his own reflection once or twice.

"You tryin'a protect me?"

Hanzo doesn't soften an inch. His reply is clear, immediate, and irrevocable: "yes."

Cole cracks, lets out a strained, short laugh and a fanged grin -- eyes still wild and frowning, blood still racing through his ears. "Why?"

Hanzo looks at him. He looks at him in the same distant, intangible way that drove him so crazy in Gibraltar. What he wouldn't give to know what this man is thinking, then and now.

Then the archer releases the ghost of a smirk and affects Cole's Southern drawl in a way that is both terrible and charming: "you already know I like lookin' at you."

The sensation in his heart is so sharp, so immediate -- as desperate as the first moment he'd decided that, if he didn't get to be by Hanzo's side while stuck on a sea-battered rock with nothing but old memories and his own faithless heart, he'd absolutely die. Even now, though he's more angry than intrigued, he knows he'll be thinking of this exact moment days, weeks -- months from now. Even now, he can see the appeal of a quick fuck on the platform of a crumbling cave, a rough and dirty baptism. Even now, he is glad to be nowhere else.

Whiplash, cowboy. He can almost see Gabriel's face in the dark, just beyond Hanzo's shoulder. He feels the outlaw rise up.

"Then you're dumber than I was." Cole juts his chin. "What happened to 'time and place,' anyhow?"

Hanzo looks at his throat, then back up at his eyes, those thick lashes like slow motion. It shouldn't make Cole's stomach seize the way that it does. "I will not apologize."

"That's your goddamn motto, ain't it? No more fuckin' games, Shimada. Why did you sign up for this job? What are you after?"

Hanzo's eyes dilate. The hand clutching Stormbow flexes its fingers, making the muscles respond in the forearm pressed against Cole's chest.

Whatever they were arguing about before, this is a whole other matter now. Even Cole's gut has stopped trying.

"If you want me to stop, then say so."

The gunslinger's lower lip snags on his canine tooth. He scoffs a little too hard. He can feel the tubes in his chest working overtime to keep his body heat at manageable levels. Someone sharp and cackling (and a little like Sombra for some reason) mutters in the back of his head: *what kind of omen would you call this?*

Hanzo leans in until their chests press together, scans his eyes, his lips, scours for an answer. Cole knows he can see his sweat, his pupils blown to black. Even with the hat to cover his eyes and thirty years of hard living to cover the rest, where Hanzo is concerned, Cole can't seem to keep his heart off his sleeve. It's like he's a teenager again, changing oils and eyeing the end of the road, the limitless horizon. That old restlessness comes back fast, gnawing like a tick. Makes his hand twitch again.

Now is the moment he says something; now is when he shoves him off, puts them back on task.

But then Hanzo has the audacity to lower his voice, that cavernous, night-creature voice: "say so, cowboy."

Cole licks his upper lip. *Well, shit.*

Then they both hear the erratic chorus of a dozen clicking hammers.

"Hands up."

On Hanzo's handsome face are three wavering red dots. It makes Cole's right eye go red, too.

He sees Hanzo focus on the Deadeye. He imagines it's quite the sight from this close up. But he can already feel it fading. A little involuntary reaction -- he's had it before. Though he didn't expect it to pop up now.

He just wants Hanzo out of those sights. So he slowly pushes off Hanzo's forearm and eases him back so that Cole can step out from the pillar with his hands up. Hanzo does the same, though he keeps those three arrows and Stormbow locked in his hands. That's alright -- Cole never drops Peacekeeper, just dangles it from his finger. Neither are very good at surrendering, apparently.

It's hard to see anything with only the lights on their shoulders covering the eight or so feet in front, but the glow of several flashlights waver just beyond the top of the stairs, where the ceiling cuts off their view. The laser sights waver with the inexpert (or nervous) hands of their holders, making the hair on the back of Cole's neck stand up. There's no way to tell how many armed scavengers have cornered them now. He can't even look at Hanzo, who must be gloating from toe to tip.

The voice coming from the top is heavy, older, feminine: thankfully, very different from the tower voice before. “Who are you?

Cole finally looks at Hanzo and Hanzo looks back. They keep getting asked that question and he can’t think of how to respond. Who are they, really? Hired guns? Ex-criminals? Wannabe heroes?

Enemies? Friends?

But Hanzo doesn’t look like he doesn’t know -- he’s looking *to* him. Waiting, expectant. Still a bit red in the face, but breathing softly. As if he hadn’t spent the last half hour viciously contradicting Cole’s methods.

It might be something slightly less than trust. Might even be the peaceful look of a man accepting imminent death. Either way, it turns out to be downright inspiring.

Cole speaks with his eyes still on Hanzo. “Killers, ma’am. Deadly, trained killers looking to put down some omnics soon as we wash the shit off our boots.”

Silence. Then, a few mild laughs. Hanzo is looking at him like he wants to smile. If they are about to die, it doesn’t seem too horrible a moment to go.

Then the woman again: “you two seem a little too wet and tired to kill anything. Where are you headed? Who’s your boss?”

“We’re the boss.” Cole smirks back at Hanzo. “We were just about to walk back up.”

“Oh yeah? Can’t make up your mind on where to hunt omnics? Don’t know your asses from your elbows?”

Hanzo finally smirks. “We were going up for a drink.”

“Or five.” Cole grins even wider. “And Chinese food.”

“Do you know of a worthy place?”

“We prefer cheap.”

“Cheap and quick. We are busy men.”

“Very busy. Have to get back to killing.”

“And drinking.”

More laughs from above. Cole can feel the tension leak out of the tunnel and his own steeled shoulders. Hanzo looks to the stairs, treats the gunslinger to his profile. He almost looks proud -- as if this was his idea all along.

“You got names, killers?”

“Hanzo,” says Hanzo. “At your service.”

“The name’s Cassidy. Pleased to meet you. We --”

Then Hanzo makes that fist again: halt and silence. Cole shuts up.

The woman waits only a beat before the tension floods back. “Yeah? You what? Speak up.”

“There it is again,” Hanzo mutters.

This time, Cole hears it, too: a heavy, metallic sound. Erratic. Like a child skipping down an old school hall, rattling door knobs and radiators with a stick. Dragging a metal toy by a string.

Cole and Hanzo look to the far end of the platform, away from the stairs, towards the dark mouth of the subway tunnel. The noise grows louder. Others join in, like the cries of the scavengers up above. Only these sounds aren’t wild at all. They’re becoming increasingly and horrifyingly systemic. Digital even.

Cole raises Peacekeeper just as Hanzo raises Stormbow. “Think we might have trouble, ma’am.”

“What? What is it?”

The sound builds. It continues to regulate -- becomes rhythmic, like a haunted metronome. If there was one child before, now there are dozens.

Hanzo speaks loudly enough for the upstairs to hear: “omnics.”

Someone cries out, “Shit! Get down there!”

But the woman cuts in, “No way. We can funnel them from the stairs. Fall back, killers.”

Cole turns to look at Hanzo, who meets his eyes just before they both bolt for the stairs. But they’re already too late.

It's like a tsunami. Omnics pour in from the oncoming tunnel in a clattering, clanking, monochromatic tide. They remind Cole of the omnics he used to see at the power plants in New Jersey -- twiggy, fast, capable of running on all fours. Long sloped faces and weapons on their haunches. He remembers because he’d made a bad joke at the time: *shoot from the hip.*

What is new is the bright white splattered up their heads and limbs, like they’d each dunked their ends into a bucket of paint.

The killers shoot like mad. Hanzo’s scatter arrow breaks the flow, makes them ignite and then disperse. Cole’s flash bang provides just enough cover for their blasts to miss, but they dive into the smoke anyway. He swings his metal hand as Hanzo cuts with Storm Bow. It’s like all the simulations before and yet entirely not; they work like moving parts of the same weapon. He shoots over the archer’s shoulder and is covered in turn. Hanzo uses him as a ballast to

swing with his heel. Arrows and bullets fly with judicious wildness. The sound is atrocious in the echoing tunnel. Peacekeeper and Storm Bow are strong enough to send omnics flying, to strike at their cores and use the explosions to demolish even more, but the omnics can shoot forever. They cannot.

“Get down!”

The gunslinger jumps down from the platform just as Hanzo unleashes another scatter arrow, one that leaves a trail of explosions that makes the whole tunnel hot. Omnics rush through, wet and scorched, covered in the bio-remnants of the tunnel, but still coming. Cole stands up in the sewer water, shoots down six more. Reload. Ducks an attack, steps sideways, puts down six more. Reload.

Then he takes a step, but jerks to a halt. His left boot won’t budge.

Cole lurches, drags, but his foot just sings in pain through the leather. He looks down but can barely see, even with the bright light on his shoulder -- his foot is beneath the blackened water, totally immobile. As stuck as if it were a bear trap.

“Shit.”

He’s about to holler for Hanzo’s aid when even more omnics come. The wave spreads, then coalesces, flows like a murmur of starlings. Hanzo is fighting savage, putting down even more with his swinging bow than with his scattering arrows. But he is back-stepping, fighting just to keep from being overwhelmed. There are too many.

That’s when Cole throws back his serape, revealing two bandoliers full of speed-loaders, and starts firing until the bullets blur together. His vision expands outward until he doesn’t see Hanzo, nor the omnics, nor the pillars, but all of it at once. Letting his hand go where it must. Letting his blood tell him when to shoot. He’s not even using the Deadeye, although he wouldn’t even be conscious of it if he did.

Upstairs, the New Yorkers exchange quizzical looks. It does not sound like only two men with one weapon each are down there fighting.

People back home thought it was unnatural, his aim. The fevers that followed, the autoimmune response. He and his mama couldn’t go back to church after word got around about that first day at the gun range. It wasn’t long before she asked him to abandon the range altogether, and though she never asked much from him, it was too much to ask just then. Not when there was nothing else for him. Not when he knew he couldn’t protect her otherwise.

He hits half of them behind his own back, arm twisted in a way no one should be able to aim with. He hits them where his real eyes can’t see, where his ears can’t hear. He hits them in ways that reinforce his lingering belief in the devil.

Then a small explosion goes off at the far end of the tunnel. Cole jerks up. The smoke is getting intense, but he can still see the approaching lights of a much larger, heavier omnic. He pats his chest, but he's run out of speed-loaders. *Fuck.*

That's when he looks up at Hanzo, up on the platform, reaching down to him, holding two bright turquoise lights like a guardian angel.

Cole has to blink away the smoke and sweat before he realizes what they are: the two bullets he'd given him in Gibraltar. The Ace up his sleeve.

Just my luck.

Cole takes them without hesitation, loads them up, and yells: "pull!"

Then he winds up his metal arm and chucks a C4 canister as far as he can. He swears he can hear the creaking ache of Storm Bow's tightening string as Hanzo draws, aims, and fires not one, but three scatter arrows at once. They meet the canister just as Cole sees the dome-like eyes of a heavy omnic unit emerge from the dark, and then he sees nothing at all. He's firing into the heavy's core, ducking into the swamp water to avoid the fire, huddled under his serape like it's an iron shield.

It's one of the loudest things he's ever heard. For a moment, he wonders if the entire tunnel isn't about to crash in around them.

But even as his ears vibrate beside his brain, he can feel the omnics retreating. He can sense their vibration dwindling through the metal tracks by his feet. He slowly stands and watches their clinking, clattering limbs scatter away up the far end of the tunnel. His mind trips over the idea of a 'bot running away, but then remembers that they work as a hive. They'll be rushing back to tell the others now. Maybe their Queen.

He fights to find Hanzo before the real world has even returned to his smoking mind. But he doesn't have to look far -- the archer is at his side, red with fire and exertion but unharmed. He helps him free his boot, muttering in hoarse Japanese. Cole loved hearing him shout during the fight, felt his own energy release with every deep-throated cry. Now he sees the stress on his face and feels a rush of concern, like all the worry of seeing him nearly overtaken has flooded in all at once. He sees Hanzo looking similarly at his own face and darts out his tongue to lick up the blood in the corner of his mouth, straightens his back, mutters with all the brave carelessness he can muster: "just a scratch, darlin.'"

Hanzo mutters something else in Japanese, likely a recrimination, but helps Cole back up to the platform without a word. Cole gets a boot on solid ground, nearly stumbles, rustles the piled bodies of broken omnics. Smoke and dust fill the spaces made by bullets and arrows and laser blasts. The two men, panting like horses, support each other's shoulders, stuck on overdrive and not yet ready to come down. Cole can feel Hanzo's pulse through his arm. The hair fallen from its knot. He stares at the black adrenaline in his eyes and sees his own reflected back.

Then the roof of the subway shudders where the pillars meet, casting a haze of dust.

They make for the stairs as fast as they can. Cole puts his weight on Hanzo as they hobble up the stairs. Then they turn a corner in the station and run straight into a crowd.

"Come on, quick! Get his hands!"

Cole throws off four men before three more stop trying to grapple his arms and swing with their semi-automatics. He throws hands until his ankle gives out, and then he falls, taking the butt of a rifle to his head. Two men put their knees on his shoulders. He remembers his principles, stops resisting, lets them take his metal arm and hold it against the small of his back. “Hang on, now! Ease up!”

He looks up from where his face is smashed against the floor and sees Hanzo in a similar position, even more men holding him down, nearly all of his teeth showing in a snarl. One of the soldiers is dragging away a couple bodies that Cole or Hanzo knocked unconscious, patting their faces, grumbling at each other through sinister-looking winter masks. Nearby, the cold gusts of outside air push white flurries through the gate -- it must be snowing again.

Strong hands start patting Cole down, pulling out weapons and items and scattering them across the rotten floor.

“Hey now,” Cole grumbles, “Watch the goods.”

“Get your hands off me, you filth!”

“Hanzo, was it?” The old woman’s voice again, somewhere behind their struggling bodies. “You got a last name?”

Hanzo snarls something in Japanese that Cole learned long ago from spats with Genji. It’s definitely not a name.

“Okay then. Cole Cassidy, the famous outlaw? You know we get Atlas News out here too, right?”

“I dunno, Sheryl… you really think that’s him?”

“Are you kidding? You saw how he put down those omnics. And he said it himself.”

“He is not Cole Cassidy,” Hanzo mutters, still struggling under his own pat-down, “He is a known liar.”

“I heard him loud and clear.”

“What’d he be doing on the island, boss? No bounties out here.”

“Listen, man -- he’s got a metal arm, a six-shooter, and he’s wearing a red cape. What do you --?”

“It’s a serape,” Cole mutters, his mouth half-crushed against the floor.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s called a *serape* . From Mexico? Got it in Tijuana when I --”

“Shut the fuck up. You -- get everything off ‘em. I’m not standing here with my thumb up my ass, waiting for the Hive to come back.”

The men searching Hanzo don't have much to turn up, though Cole can see all that they unroll even with his face smashed against the floor: their basic pack kit, the two knives, a steel prayer-bead bracelet, the gold-veined ouroboros gourd, a half-used pencil of eye kohl, a bar napkin from Kolkata with a phone number on it, four casino chips from three different casinos, and a wallet with about nine different credit cards, ID's, and licenses.

Around Cole, there's a veritable assembly line: more casino chips, two old playing cards, tweezers, a knife in the lining of his hat, a miniature sewing kit with red thread, extra bullets, a broken wind chime, a small knife in a slot on his metal arm, a Swiss army knife with a live electrode option, one hundred dollars (all bills assembled), a similar wallet situation as Hanzo, a shot glass with a Christmas-decorated cactus painted on it, another knife in his boot heel and a rolled-up tourist brochure from Giza, Egypt. Not to mention the snack wrappers and old ticket stubs and the piece of caramel that's been stuck to the very bottom since 2061.

Then the man holding Cole's cuffed arms leans to the side, goes into his back jean pocket, and pulls out a long golden sash like a magician unveiling an endless scarf.

He holds it up to his friends, befuddled, at which point its glossy, dangling end catches Cole's eye. Catches Hanzo's eye, too, if the way he's staring at Cole is any indication.

The gunslinger tries to grin at him, but it's wiped clean in a second when he sees the LumériCo cube get handed off and slipped into someone's backpack along with the rest of his belongings.

Well, shit.

Sheryl sounds like she's getting impatient. "Hog-tie 'em. We'll sort it out when we get back."

"Don't think we got the means for that, boss."

"You guys… *ugh.* Just get 'em up, then. We'll chain 'em in the truck. Wait, use those."

Cole hears the crackle of something like a cattle prod and elects not to struggle as they slap on the same handcuffs Sombra had gifted him with in Dorado; one for Hanzo, one for Cole. He can just picture how Sombra would laugh at him now.

Then he's hoisted up, a flimsy mask comes over his head and he sees nothing but muted gray. He can hear Hanzo swearing threateningly to his side, but he talks over him: "where you taking us?"

"Downtown. Others'll see what to do with you."

"You collect on that bounty instead'a letting us do our jobs, and you might be seeing a whole lot more omnics come soon. Now that they're running back to tattle."

"Oh, don't you worry, Mr. Cassidy." He hears her cock a shotgun. "I'm factoring in all the pertinent information. You just focus on keeping your head down. Ceilings tend to be kinda low around here. It's an old city."

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One week and five days ago

A black-hooded omnic rides out from the valley at Giza just as the gunslinger rides in. Cole tugs his own long scarf further up his face, tucks the tassels under his serape. He uses the same hand to tip his hat as they pass. The omnic's camel lets out a honk and he nudges his horse a little faster. He hasn't seen another sentient being in the past twelve miles and doesn't expect to see any more (until he meets Fareeha), but he can't be too careful. After spying his own grimacing mug on every news station from Cancun to Morocco, the desert valley seems like one of the few places left on earth where he can freely travel: just him, his horse, and the little LumériCo box riding at the bottom of his canvas duffel.

And the sands are quiet. Dark and serrated hills cut the blue-black horizon, far beyond the reach of the bright city he left behind. Giza experienced an economic boom after Omnica built the GOD A.I. and hasn't stopped yet. The dwindling glow from Anubis's glassy city lends something of a holy aura to the gunslinger's back, like a desert aurora borealis. But he's not looking back. He looks to the emerging stars and he thinks to himself, not for the first time: *just you and me again* . How many times has he looked up at the sky like it was his only friend in the world? His only true constant?

As ancient mounds and hints of ruins start to emerge from the dark, Cole can't help thinking that Ana should've been taken here. Safe under the watch of hawk-faced gods. Enshrined alongside the rest of the great queens.

He forcibly turns his restless mind to Fareeha and feels somewhat bolstered. If strong, sure-footed Fareeha has information that he doesn't, that can only be a good sign. All he needs to figure out is exactly how much information he should share -- information like the humming little drive at his back. He wants to keep her safe from whatever business he's already stirred up but he's also highly aware that her strict, by-the-book method isn't the most suitable for this kind of work. Or maybe he's gotten too used to playing by his own rules.

Play it by ear. He strokes the mane of the ornery Arabian beneath him and finds he has to tug hard to redirect her path. He wonders how many times this little horse has taken trips out into the desert during the nighttime, how assured she is of her own path. Hard to let go of old habits in a world where security is a rare commodity. After all the upheaval, the relocation, the mourning... Cole can't see letting go of his old ways when he's already been robbed of so much.

More stars appear, old winking friends. His squinting Deadeye peels apart the blue-gray darkness as he lights up a cigar. Compact pillars sprout from the sand like wind-scarred knuckles. Low tombs and sloping walls follow, remnants emerging from the darkness one at a time, not totally unlike the Pueblo ruins he'd explored just outside Santa Fe. Harmonious and symmetrical structures come and go as his horse walks on, appearing and disappearing as if he were walking through time itself. Dimly, he recalls the repeating dream Hanzo told him on the night he broke his gourd: lanterns on an invisible path.

Cole puffs, smiles with black irony at the stars, and shakes his head. Now he gets it: the frustration. Purgatory's no place for men like them.

Dimly, he remembers the Levanter, wonders if it brought sands from the very sands he now traverses, but then a sudden wind puts sand in his eyes and he remembers the dangers of a wandering imagination this far into the desert.

Half of the cigar has joined the sands before Cole is able to make out a dim orange glow on a rocky outcropping. An enclosure of well-preserved tombs outlines a high, carved-out shelf: a royal cemetery. Beautiful symmetry and soft stone devotedly carved into jagged slab. Soft blue moonlight proving the blessedness of the chosen location. That flickering orange light must be from torches -- *why'd she have to go and light up the whole damn graveyard?*

It's beautiful despite the eeriness. He can't help but whistle at the sheer scale, how striking it is against the now brilliant galactic display. Throughout his many wanderings he's seen the remains of thousands of years of human civilization, all of them building their way to the stars. The soundless echo of the striving centuries. For reasons he can't explain, and not for the first time, he wishes he could show it to Hanzo.

Then cracking rifle-shot pierces the sand two inches from his horse's hoof.

"Woah!"

She startles, rears, and throws him off as clean as if he were a bird taking flight.

He's on his knees in a second, aware of just how pointless it is in another: there's no cover. There's no running. Between the rising walls of the flat-topped structures and the rock's craggy edges, there's dozens of places a shooter could hide. Every swaying palm tree is his potential murderer. Fish in a barrel. Easiest bounty on record. And, as always, his racing mind: who could've known he'd be coming here? Who, that would offer anything so courteous as a warning shot?

A croaky, high-pitched voice answers: "you are a long way from home, American!"

Cole's cheek twitches. The accent is local -- vagabonds, probably. Gotta be more than one type of outcast who wouldn't mind bunking in these ruins, nomads who might get a bit over-protective of their space. Not necessarily someone who'd recognize his face, at least.

He looks up from the shadow of his hat, peels the darkness apart. If he can make out a strong enough heat signature, find a shape amidst the shadows, he can take the shot. Or he can talk himself out.

“Just passing through, ma’am. Didn’t mean to trespass.”

A patch of palm leaves flutters like black slashes across the face of the rising moon. An ascending wind brings life-like movement to everything, even the wisps of dust off the flat roofs. Sand mists like evacuating ghosts. Shifting upon shifting. Cole gets a chill.

“Passing through, hm?” They sound amused. “There is only the dead beyond here.”

“Well,” Cole evens out his tone, tries to sound friendly; the fact that they haven’t killed him yet is all the hope he needs. “My friend has some mighty interesting camping ideas. Thought I’d oblige her this once.”

“Ah!” A chuckle, softer than the wind. “Heeding the whims of a young lady, hm?”

Cole feels something creep inside his guts and stay there. Some instinct he can’t label. “Yes, ma’am.”

“It figures. You always were such a charmer.”

He rises to his feet with shaking knees.

Somewhere in his dodgy memory, in that blank space he relies on when there’s nothing else to give, he’s known it since she first spoke.

No. There’s no way. Don’t go crazy on me now, cowboy -- you’re bound to lose your head.

“I… I’ve heard it said.”

One of the fluttering palm leaves drops to the sand below, rises, and starts walking towards him.

“Didn’t mean to trespass, though.” He takes a step back. “If you’ve a mind... not to shoot me…”

The sniper walks. A long rifle is cradled across their arms, resting like a child. Cole feels his legs threaten to give way. The sand beneath his boots shifts. His hand twitches violently, not knowing whether to reach for his gun, take off his hat, or make the sign of the cross.

“...I’ll… I’ll just be on my way... and…”

The sniper walks. *Her* walk: effortlessly upright, a long and brisk step even across the shifting sands. Her black mask takes shape in the dark: the face of the raptor birds she loved so much. Shades of *lapis lazuli* : color of queens.

“Jesus. *Jesus* .”

One of his knees hits the ground. The heat in his chest doubles. He feels a shortness of breath rise up like a desert storm, choking his lungs, drying out his airways.

It’s some kind of trick. He’s thirsty and tired and he’s conjured a mirage. It’s a curse from his own Deadeye. She always told him it would start to hurt one day. Now it’s weeping and he can’t make it stop.

He stops breathing as soon as she stops walking. Her mask lifts. Gleaming white hair. A patch over her right eye. A smile just for him.

“It is good to see you again, Cole.”

The gunslinger drags off his hat, lowers the other knee, and looks up with stars in his eyes.

“ *Ana* .”

She puts her hand on his head. Whispers something he can’t hear beyond his own storm-swept blood.

Every step feels like quicksand. The sound of Ana’s voice had always been enough to keep Cole straight, to rattle him into attention, but he still feels like he’s been hit with one of her tranquilizer darts. He’d tried to touch her face, and she let him, but then she took his hand too soon and urged him up the rocky path before he was sure he could even move. He uses the edge of his serape to dry his cheeks and it takes him a full five minutes of slow plodding to find his voice again.

“What in the goddamn hell’s going on, Ana? I thought you were Fareeha. I got a --”

“Encrypted message, I know.” A soft chuckle. “I had to let you two think that you had *some* secrets.”

Something about that chuckle stirs up something dark and fermented in Cole’s chest. “But -- *why?* Why would you hide? We all mourned you, Ana. *I* --”

“I needed time. Sometimes we all need time, wouldn’t you agree?”

He bites his lip. “I couldn’t stay, after...” He puts his hat back on his head. “I couldn’t stay.”

“I understand, Cole. We each have our own path to walk. Now I must ask for your understanding.”

“But, Ana,” he can’t seem to stop saying her name, “What were --?”

“There will be time to answer all of your questions later. Right now, I have much to show you.”

Cole clenches his jaw to soreness, but still, he climbs. He’d follow her anywhere -- always had. The graveyard chills worse than the night wind and he bundles his serape like a hiding place. His head vibrates all the way to his ears and it takes every ounce of self-preservation to

convince himself he's not having some kind of fever dream. Like she isn't some evil spirit masked with a friendly face to lead him, finally, long over-due, into Hell.

Still-vibrant murals gesture to heaven with feathered arms. Torchlight gives the illusion of movement. Two engraved obelisks refract moonlight before the central tomb, where statues of raptor-headed gods defend the entrance. Between staring at their haunting eyes and Ana's back, Cole nearly stumbles into a bottomless pit.

His cigar falls into that void and disappears. "This ain't right."

He repeats himself in the obelisk's shadow. "None'a this is right."

Ana doesn't look back. Her slim shoulders are as poised as he remembers, but her voice is not. "The *mastaba* are even older than the pyramids. People have been digging at this site for centuries. If there is anyone left to offend, we are the least amongst their offenders."

Cole follows her into the first anti-chamber of the central tomb and lets out a shuddering breath. It's like walking into the past -- her recon setup hasn't changed one bit. The same gun station stands beside a torch-lit stairwell, shelves full of schematics and ammo. Generators sit beneath auto-deploy workstations alongside crates bearing the Overwatch logo. A whole station hosts biotic-synthesis tech, some of which Cole doesn't even recognize. Wooden planks sit across concrete slabs to hold up a hotplate with a large kettle, the same kind he's seen her use dozens of times.

He drags his eyes across to the left, where two humble wooden tables mount two monitors. One shows a map of the world. The other shows a skull-shaped mask that Cole recognizes from holovids, intel files, and the shattered eyes of many an afflicted civilian.

Cole looks at Ana. "Reaper?"

Ana looks at him. "Reaper."

"You're tracking Reaper? Why?"

Then a voice like sharpened rust echoes from the doorway: "because we might be the only ones who can."

Even in the fog of unreality that has been this entire evening, Cole still draws faster than he can think. Peacekeeper gazes down a statue of a man, firm and unphased, built like a truck despite a receding tuft of silvery hair. A huge rifle sits in a low yet prepared grip, a model Cole has never seen before. He sports a motorcycle jacket with a stars-n-stripes color scheme that goes against every single one of Cole's biker sensibilities. A blazing red visor makes up most of a mask that leaves only dense forehead wrinkles in view. Definitely American, definitely ex-military. Utterly out of place.

It's a figure he's only ever seen in fuzzy surveillance footage on the evening news. Cole squints, gesturing. "You seem familiar. I point a gun at you before?"

Ana speaks from behind him. "This is Soldier 76."

Cole keeps his eye on the man, who is walking past Cole like it's nothing, right past where Ana is pouring her kettle. "Soldier 76? The guy who broke into Grand Mesa last year and stole Overwatch property?"

"Yes. Some of it is here. Would you like some tea, Cole?"

"The fuck is he doing here?"

"If you're done with the reunion," growls 76, pausing in the entrance to the stairwell, "Maybe we can cut to the briefing."

"Hold your horses, old man." Cole keeps his gun level. "Y'got a lot to answer for."

Ana rises, tea in hand, and pushes a cup into Cole's robotic hand. "He broke into the Watchpoints to secure arms and intel, including data vital to this mission."

Cole squints at Ana, both Peacekeeper and steaming mug held aloft. "What mission?"

She taps on the screen showcasing Reaper. Sips her tea. "Your mission."

Cole looks from 76, who's still standing upright in the doorway, back to Ana on the other side, who is looking at him like this is just another team meeting. His old captain's face is as inscrutable as ever, but her casual acceptance of a situation that is other-wordly to the gunslinger is somehow, by itself, calming.

"I need'a sit down," he grunts. Slowly, he holsters his weapon and plants himself on the ledge with the tea set, scooting one of the pillows and trying to rearrange his guts back into their original position. But he gives up -- his life has been packed with last-minute upsets, life-changing moments coming like herds of wild horses one right after the other. He learned long ago to just hold onto the reins and pray you don't get bucked off. If you dig your heels in and think too much about how fast you're going, you're liable to fall hard and never get back up again.

When he looks back up at Ana, she's smiling at him in a funny way. "What?"

She shrugs. "I've never heard your knees pop like that."

"Well we all got a little long in the tooth," he grins, lets the sight of her wash over him, lets in just a small sliver of the joy that's threatening to bring back the tears. His jaw tightens and he frowns at the monitor, tosses his head towards it: "what's all this about then?"

Ana taps a few keys and the left monitor projects a screen three times bigger in the air between them, bright blue and hovering in the dusty tomb like an alien visitation.

Cole leans back so he can see it all at once. "That's the New York Watchpoint."

"I am sure you all discussed Reaper's attempted raid of Gibraltar last year. No doubt Winston has taken great strides to bolster Athena's defensive capabilities since then. Talon will think twice before making another attempt on her systems. But here," Ana gestures to the map, "The AI is exposed."

“The AI? There’s still an AI at New York?”

“There are still AI running at each and every remaining Watchpoint. Gibraltar, Peru, Kauai… they are dormant, but were too integrated into the facilities to be worth removing altogether. And the UN never fully dismantled any of the Watchpoints -- a cost issue, I think -- which is why 76 was able to steal an experimental weapon from Grand Mesa.”

Cole looks over his shoulder. The blue cast from the hologram makes 76 look like a ghost; an unconscious shiver passes through the gunslinger’s metal arm. That hand starts to twitch, but only once. He’s still got the tea, he remembers, and drinks it.

“So what’s the problem?”

“The agent database is not accessible at every Watchpoint -- only in activated AI systems.”

“New York’s AI has been activated? How?”

Ana taps a few keys and the map zooms in, growing increasingly life-like as it does. Details appear on the crumbling rooftops. Waves appear in the river. The decaying, brutalist texture of the Watchpoint itself comes into stark relief and with it the roaming bodies of hundreds and hundreds of --

“Omnics.”

“A hostile and sophisticated hive-mind. The government suspects that the omnics are using a broad spectrum signal to recruit other omnics within a radius of hundreds of miles. A signal that they cannot trace. Only the New York AI is capable of something like that. It was designed to subvert other signals, to invent encryptions beyond the capacity of other processors to decode, all to protect transmissions regarding the large-scale weapons developed there. We don’t know how they managed to turn it on, but…”

“You said... they’re recruiting?”

“They’ve set up a blockade and have virtually quarantined the lower island of Manhattan. They are also attacking civilians. The UN will not interfere, so the government sent out a third-party SOS to a bevy of ‘professional’ recruiters. One of my acquaintances won the bid -- I am sure you have heard of Rune.”

“You’re on Rune’s roster?”

“I have worked as a bounty hunter for years. I received many jobs from Rune under the codename Shrike.”

Cole sloshes his tea. “Ho-lee shit. *You’re* the Shrike?”

Ana gestures with her own cup. “Pay attention, cowboy. As soon as Reaper finds a way past the omnics, they will infiltrate. There is no Winston in New York to bolster the AI’s firewalls. You have to accept this job, fly into US airspace with Rune’s contact, infiltrate the Watchpoint, and stop Reaper from getting what he wants.”

Cole's throat goes dry as all of his focus goes to the little LumériCo box sitting at the bottom of his satchel.

That's why Talon wanted the drive. That's their plan. Hell, maybe Sombra let him walk away with one just to draw Overwatch out, get them to play their hand. Maybe she thought Cole would run back to Winston, get the whole team to confidently strike and expose themselves to her web. The scan he got just before he skipped Dorado ensured him that neither he nor the drive was rigged with anything foreign, but if she implemented something more sophisticated, he'd have no way of knowing. Maybe no one on earth would have any way of knowing.

He almost goes for his satchel again, then stops. If he tells Ana about it, he'll have to tell her how he got it. He'd have to tell her that he potentially exposed all of Overwatch to the machinations of the greatest hacker in the world, a hacker that was definitely on the payroll of their greatest enemy.

You're the one who wanted to work alone, cowboy. So work alone.

His hands go still. He frowns at the map, as if in deep concentration, and sips the tea. Strong, spicy -- her favorite. He wishes he could let it warm his heart.

Then Ana taps the keyboard and a second, smaller holoscreen appears, showing a lofty skyscraper in the heart of Numbani. "We only heard about this mission a week ago, and I already messaged Rune to tell her that I would accept. The meeting is in three days. But I am going to tell her that I have to back out, and send you in my stead -- I'll tell her that I owe you a favor. With your background as a Blackwatch agent, I am sure she will be satisfied with the exchange."

Cole is very still. He regards Ana with a firm jaw that barely moves when he finally does speak. "Why don't you and the commando here go for it? You know Watchpoint: New York better than anyone living, with the exception of Torbjörn. You even call him?"

Ana levels him with her sharp gaze. She never needed to yell in order to silence or inspire. "76 and I have another matter to attend to."

"Let me guess," Cole narrows his eyes, glancing back at 76. "'Need-to-know basis?'"

He doesn't move. He hasn't moved this entire time. *Definitely a soldier.*

Ana supplies, "Correct."

"Captain -- *Ana* -- all due respect, that's horseshit. You're right, I'm not your junior anymore. I need to know what I say I need to know." Then, in a grim voice he can't bite back, "Bad enough I had to find out you were alive all this time, now you're asking me to stay in the dark again?"

Ana inclines her head and the gunslinger sees her sympathy. She's always been the toughest person in the room. But she always cared; hard-nosed, soft-hearted. She held all her true tenderness for Fareeha, but behind all the no-nonsense discipline, beyond the ruthlessly fast

pace she set for everyone else to chase after, she had a spot in her heart for everyone in her command, a spot that only got bigger over the years. A room for each agent. Even one for Cole, after awhile.

“Helix is protecting the God program here.” He’s not used to seeing anxiety on her. “Did you know that?”

Cole nods.

“Anubis has been contained by their firewalls, but Talon is constantly pushing. They have this hacker... I’ve never seen the like. It’s only a matter of time before they succeed.”

Cole sips his tea. He starts wondering about Sombra’s plan again, but stops himself -- not a chance in Hell he’ll ever figure that one out. Better he just assumes that she’s got a finger in every pie from here to the moon.

“This fight is bigger than Reaper, Cole. Something is happening all over the world, and this is just one of many battlefields. But this is *our* field,” she looks back to 76, “And this one,” she gestures to New York, “Is yours. To involve you in anything else would jeopardize both.”

Spoken like a true soldier -- God, he didn’t miss this side of her. It was a branch of his problem with all authority figures but none so worse as the military hierarchy. Keep the grunts in the dark because they can’t handle the big picture. Don’t let them know what’s really going on or they might hesitate. He’d never pulled the trigger when he didn’t have to but he also damn sure never hesitated when he did.

Knowing he’s never gonna get her to budge, he just shakes his head. “What about their hacker? Managed to fuck with Athena’s firewalls, the security protocols, Winston’s OWLS, now Helix… probably knocking at New York’s door as we speak.”

“If they could find a way in, yes, they would be there now. They are not. That means that something is blocking their way. The same thing that likely blocked those dead US agents.”

“And you think lil’ old me can get through what Talon hackers can’t?”

“Yes.”

Cole scoffs, shakes his head, halfway flustered by her confidence. “You are too much, cap’n.”

“No one followed you here. You must have had some trackers in the states -- your headlines were big enough -- but you managed to elude them. You grew up in a gang who were experts at stealing from companies ten, twenty times their size. Breaking into unbreakable places. And you worked very closely with the greatest covert ops commander of our generation for years. You are more than qualified to take on this mission. And,” Ana calls up another, smaller hologram -- an email, “Rune has stipulated that this will be a two-man job. So you will have a partner, and I expect she would only pair you with the best of the best.”

“Ana,” Cole starts slow, having trouble meeting her eyes, let alone saying what he needs to say, “Why don’t you and me just go to Winston with this? Or Torbjörn? Shit, he could

probably build something to crack into that place -- he probably designed it. I ain't sayin' I won't do it, but we should get the whole team on this mess and take care of it proper. You don't have to --"

"Cole." Her eyes lower again. "I know that Talon attacked Gibraltar. I know that you are all laying low, and for good reasons. Reasons I cannot cannot yet fully explain. Even if you did add Winston to your party, he is not equipped for missions like this. And Torbjörn as well, but he is too interfering. He makes everything his business and that is the last thing we need right now. Also... I do not want them all to know that I am still alive. Not yet."

"But why?"

"I have my reasons. I will ask you to respect them."

"What about Fareeha?"

For the first time, Ana looks hesitant -- even offended. "I sent her a letter."

"A *letter?* Jesus Christ, Ana --"

"I have my reasons. I will not say so again." Her strident tone rounds down into something smoother, but still unshakeable. "You may not understand, Cole. You may not understand even if I explained it to you. That is the way of life sometimes. But you must trust me when I say that it is not the right time for me to come back, and that this is not a task that should be thrown to Winston's new team. The risk is too great, and time is too short."

"And if I need more firepower? If this ain't just a two-man deal after all?"

"Then ask the locals. They have been successfully staving off the horde for months, especially in the south-Manhattan region. They could be a great asset, if persuaded. Improvise. You're good at that."

Cole slings his eyes towards the carved faces above the twin tables, the long arms bearing feathers. Then down, to the small image of Reaper at their feet.

"Would it be alright if I called Torb or anyone else if I needed some help with this job? If I kept quiet about you?"

"As long as it does not delay your progress."

Cole tightens his crossed arms. He looks at the sand between the stones on the floor. Trapped between the cracks for thousands of years.

He sighs into his cup, finally takes a sip. And then: "I'll do it."

Ana smiles. 76 grunts, moves, and Cole watches him walk out the same way he came in.

Then Ana takes his empty tea cup, sets it down, and gestures to the stairwell at the back of the chamber. "Come. It's getting stuffy in here."

Cole follows her up the soft stone staircase, hunching to avoid the low ceilings, and takes in a silent breath when he realizes that she sleeps here. Her cot, nestled on a platform next to the stairs that take them to the roof of the antechamber. Her photos, her sleep dart gun. There's a small, solitary hologram emitter over her blankets, but he doesn't linger. It feels rude, even though Ana isn't looking. Like he's passing some memorial for a war he never saw. Seeing this small, cramped space, even more than listening to her voice for the past half hour, proves to him that she is well and truly alive, and it sets in him a painful rush, like the drugs he took with the other Deadlock boys so they could ride their bikes all night.

The wind blew out the torches, makes whorling sand spouts below the shelf, hiding the moon and stars along with a new set of glacial clouds. Cole looks up at the sky with a slow sigh, then looks at Ana and takes in a deep breath. She seats herself on a slope of sand leading up to a short stone wall, where she's situated a telescope and laptop -- one that shows the same infrared image of the Anubis pyramid as the one down below. He parks himself on the sand beside her, back to a short pillar of mounted stone blocks and lights up a cigar in lieu of speaking.

Ana leans to look through the telescope, then takes up a short pencil and jots down a few numbers. He looks down at her work, at which point she glances up at him -- quick, pointed. Cole just smiles -- his go-to mask.

"Go on, Cole," she says, returning to her schematics. "You must have questions."

He pulls hard on the cigar. 'Questions' doesn't quite cover it. If he isn't careful when he opens his mouth, he's liable to ruin this miraculous moment. "You sure about all this, Ana? My bounty is making headlines. I show my face before the news moves on, and any job I'm running is gonna get more coverage than a --"

"Oh, hush," she waves her pencil at him, "My bounty is ten million more than yours, you don't see me whining."

A surprised chuckle falls out like he dropped it. There might be a hint of hysteria there, but he doesn't care -- she's smiling, too.

She puts her good eye back to the telescope as he takes more steadying puffs. The hem of her cloak flutters alongside Cole's serape, both marked with bullet holes, both letting the breeze pass through. Two birds posted up on a lonely nest. Under the hum of wind, her soft, scratching pencil is strangely reassuring. Despite her godly aim, there's nothing mystical about Ana. No super soldier serums, no genetic enhancements. She and Cole were two of a very small group of natural-born killers at Overwatch, but while Cole laced his hard work with a considerable amount of fool's luck, she fought for every step she took. Never wore a medal she didn't earn. Her constancy and diligence are, as ever, a grounding presence he desperately needs. Only someone so still could aim so well. All his running, all his action -- sitting with her now, he feels things bubble up that he hasn't thought about in years.

Cole takes the cigar from his mouth and looks at the burning end like he might stare into a campfire.

“You ever get mad at him?”

Ana looks up from her schematics without moving her head. “Who?”

Cole replaces the cigar between his teeth. “Jack.”

Slowly, she returns to her work. “No. Why?”

“Leaving you behind.”

A pause. “He knew that I knew what I was doing.” She adjusts the dial on the scope. “I turned off my comm. I missed my shot and was wounded. There was procedure, and he followed it. He had a whole team to think about, not just me.”

To his own ears, Cole’s voice sounds like grated tar. “Would you have done the same?”

“We will never know. I never wanted to be commander -- I do not know how I would have handled such decisions. Either way,” she glances at him, barely a blink, then looks back through the telescope, “It is in the past.”

Cole looks out at the shifting sands. “Tell you the truth… I wasn’t too mad at him neither. Oh, I tried,” he waves his Elvis zippo at Ana’s skeptical look, “Even went off at him once. Gabe shut me down real hard after.” He hesitates. Examines her. “Do you mind? Hearing this?”

“I said to speak freely, Cole.”

The gunslinger points his eyes back to the sand. *Of course she doesn’t want to hear this shit.* But he finds he can’t stop. Finds he has things he needs to say, even if it doesn’t do anyone any good. “Guess I knew it wasn’t ever really his fault. Just wanted something to get mad at. Something I could get my hands on. But, seeing his face after that… Just the look in his eye every day after that...” he puts the cigar back in his mouth. “Well. Anyway.” Puffs out a thick plume. “Guess I had it coming.”

Ana finally looks up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I shot your cap off? When Gabe first picked me up?” Now he offers a grin, hiding, but growing bolder. “You in the bell tower, me in the street?”

“Yes,” a raspy chuckle rolls into words, “What was it you kept yelling at me?”

“‘High noon.’”

“Yes. Like a madman.” She chuckles again, shakes her head as she looks out at the desert. “You always got so sloppy after using that red eye of yours. We really did think you might be insane.”

“Well, I ain’t ever had such a large, specialized team a’hard asses sweep through my hometown like that.”

“ Mm . I think the way you were captured was punishment enough for almost ending my life.”

“Yeah. Jesus, Gabe really roughed me up for that shot. Though he put me on enough anti-sniper duty to make me think he’d decided then and there in that street to cut me a deal. When he…”

Cole hangs his jaw like he wants to say more, but all that comes out is a low hum. He mouths his cigar instead. Points his eyes at the slim obelisks that frame the view of Giza. He’s spent so much time staring out at nothing, or drifting off during long car rides. Hiding in the back pews of churches while the organ player ground out a hallelujah for the weary lot that wandered in from God-knows-where. Rehearsing the things he wished he could say to Ana, or Gabe, or Jack, or any of the others he’d lost. Coming up with things he wished he’d said long ago.

Should’ve spent less time drinking; he might remember some of it enough to say it now. But there is one question he knows he should ask, even if he doesn’t know if he really wants the answer.

“Do you know what really did it, Ana? What really set it all off, in the end?”

She picks her head up. Her hair is dark beneath her headscarf -- jet-black, like it used to be. A few loose pieces twists up and around, curling like white tails through the gusts.

But her eyes are heavy-lidded, heavier than Cole has ever seen them. Fixed on the lights of Giza.

Then, he realizes: all of the things he wanted to say before only mattered to him because she was dead. Watching her now, all he really wants to do is breathe.

“We all have our blind spots. Some more than others.” She sends him a quick smile, then looks out again. “You have always had good instincts, Cole. It’s why you left. You were closer to the ground, you heard what was coming.” She adjusts her scarf. “Remember that, while you are on this mission.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but she keeps going. “Did you ever hear Mondatta speak? I used to listen to his early recordings sometimes. He often said, ‘we don’t know what we don’t know.’ I know he meant it about the future of omnic and human relations, but I have been thinking about it lately. I think it means much more than that. You think about it for awhile, too, hm? Tell me what you come up with. I am revisiting so many things that I thought I knew for sure, examining what I used to call common sense. There is always something new to learn, *habibi .”*

Then she takes his hand and, grateful, he closes his fingers around hers. His heart gives one last shudder, then rolls down that little hill of sand to join all the others, embalmed beneath the earth. *Now* he knows it’s all real.

“To tell the truth, captain,” Cole tightens his fingers as much as he dares, “I’m not sure about nothing anymore. Whether Overwatch should come back or not. Whether working in the shadows is the right thing to do.” He can’t take his eyes off their hands, like it’s another mirage that will cease to persist should he take away his gaze. “Wish to hell you’d tell me what you and him are up to all the way out here.”

Ana turns to her laptop, taps a few keys. “Since the incident, I have spent much of my time here. I have bought food in the markets, watched the sun set past the face of Anubis. I have slept in the streets and in apartments overlooking the river. Everywhere, I have heard mothers’ cry for lost children. I have heard fear from both omnics and humans, fanatics and abolitionists. And I have heard whispers of Overwatch. ‘Will they return? Are they responsible for this? Is there any hope?’” Ana turns towards him with a lifetime’s worth of worry in her eyes and Cole suppresses the need to do something foolish, like take her hand again. “Fighting from the shadows is no sin, Cole." She looks back out at the desert with a sigh. "Sometimes, to combat evil, we must turn away from Allah.”

Cole considers what she has said. Always trying to absorb her subtle lessons through his brash, wildfire self. Really trying to let something sink deep for once. But she’s being even more vague than usual, and he can’t deny -- it rubs him the wrong way. Between the shock of seeing her alive and the deliberately withheld information, it takes everything he has to keep his boots on solid ground.

“Y’know, Ana,” he keeps his tone light, surprises himself by how well he succeeds, “My memory ain’t the best. Seems like the only childhood times I can recall are lit up like big screen shows. Lots of gunfire and fantastical shit. Scorpions on cacti,” he grins, waves the hand with the cigar at the sky. “But when I try to remember simple things, like, my mama’s face... it’s hard. It comes to me, and then it goes. Like it was never even mine to begin with. And when I try to recall, when I really try… it’s not her face that comes to mind.”

Ana doesn’t answer. She puts a hand on Cole’s shoulder, but lets it drop as easily as sand pushed by the wind. Here one moment, gone another.

“I will send you all the details once you get a new phone. You should rest here for the night.” She puts her eye to the telescope again, jots down more numbers. “There may be a sand storm in a few hours.”

Cole thinks once again of showing her the LumériCo crate, but seeing all the concern on her face, more than he’d seen even in Overwatch’s last days, he opts to keep it to himself. Talon can’t get into the Watchpoint yet, so they can’t use their drive yet. Doesn’t change his mission. If Sombra thinks he’ll loyally hand it over to Overwatch, that he’ll bring his *barrio* out into the sun, then her research is off. He’s not that good a man.

Then he thinks of asking Ana what she’s doing with that telescope, but thinks he’s gotten about as much out of her as he’s liable to get. And he desperately wants a drink.

So he stands and dusts the sand off his jeans, just catching her firmly-set mouth from the corner of his eye. “You worried about me, cap?”

“Since I will not be there to watch your back, yes. I worry. But you have completed tougher missions.” She smirks at him over her shoulder. “And you are looking a bit more long in the tooth.”

“Heh, sure am. But don’t you fret none. You said Rune’s job called for two people?”

“I did.”

He looks at her one last time, as if she might disappear with the dawn. Memorizing what he sees. “Then I’ll wager she finds me the best of partners.”

She keeps her eyes on him. “You must be more careful than that, Cole. I am sorry, truly, that I cannot tell you more, but if you listen to one thing I say, listen to this: you cannot trust anyone.” Then she turns back to Anubis. “It is a different world now. You never know which side someone is on. Remember yours.”

Cole stops when his boots almost touch the edge of Ana’s cot and he crouches to look at the photographs. All framed relics from Ana’s own office in Zurich. One of the core Overwatch team: a group portrait, one he remembers very well; the first he was ever included in, finally feeling like a proper member of the team and not just one of Gabe’s Blackwatch delinquents. One of Fareeha flying on Ana’s shoulders: precious, personal. Something that makes Cole smile so hard that it hurts.

And a small, crumpled photo of the Crisis Three themselves: even more personal, creased with fold lines as it if it were once kept in a wallet. Or the inner pocket of a well-worn coat.

Cole picks this one up, thumbs over the reflection of a young Ana Amari. Even now, in this situation, he can hardly keep the whistle behind his teeth. *God, she’s gorgeous.* Sharp brows over even sharper eyes. Pointed cupid’s bow. *Udjat* tattoo like the boldest possible assertion. *Lapis lazuli* and all the natural talent in the world.

Gabe and Jack aren’t too bad, either. Cole chuckles, remembering how overwhelmed he was with all the attractive, talented people he was suddenly surrounded with his first day as an official agent. In way over his head in more ways than one. But it was Ana that made him dizzy.

He sets the frame down with reverence and sighs. Never did have a chance, first time he laid eyes on her. Couldn’t keep from staring -- the way she glared at him, haughty and uncompromising, dark eyes like coals he’d love to see burn. A perfect coat of feathers he'd just love to ruffle.

He snorts ruefully. Always did have a thing for people with tattoos and piercings and too much confidence for one earthly form to hold. That, and there’s just something about the eyes of a long-distance killer.

But things change. He's a different man now, and his feelings for Ana were too complicated for him to sort out even then. Now it's just the memory of a warm ember, a piece of his heart he was eternally grateful to see still walking.

Cole sets the photo down and tries to ignore the sight of the sleep dart resting beside the cot. He remembers what she used to say about good eyes and how, after a while, they start to hurt.

He heads for the next tomb over. Typically, he'd sleep out under the stars, but the wind has turned the sand airborne. It does his worn-out heart good to toss up his gaze and see Ana still perched with her telescope, still watching Anubis, long coat whipping in the storm. If he focuses on the image enough, he might have a chance at sleeping well tonight.

But when he enters the new chamber, he finds 76. Unlike the other tomb, this chamber is completely empty -- whatever diggers once ransacked these chambers must've really cleaned house -- save for the old man himself and what few possessions he has littering the small area. His cot is a simple snap-up you could buy in any US Army/Navy store, but the sleeping bag over it is standard-issue only, as is the round bag the man uses to prop up his back against the wall. There's a newspaper flared out in his hands, the headlines promising reports on a global hacking spree.

The only possible hints of personality are a bottle of rye on the plastic (Overwatch) lock case beside him and a dumbbell on the floor, and neither of these go too far as descriptors. Like the mask he still wears, he's carefully blank. The red visor just pointed at him. Waiting.

Cole leans against the entryway, hooks his thumbs behind his belt. He can wait, too. "Can't sleep?"

76 angles his visor back to his newspaper. "No."

Anticipating a whole conversation full of monosyllabic answers, Cole opts for provocation. "Heavy conscience?"

"You could say that."

The gunslinger chews what remains of his cigar. "Don't know what your plans are, old man, and I don't feel like launching a full interrogation. But you touch one hair on her head and I'll put you lower than any a'these mummies."

76 chuckles, though he seems out of practice; it's hoarse, too-low. Like he's got sand in his lungs. "You don't have anything to worry about."

Cole expels a lot of smoke. "Good." Then he steps out of the way. Then, a little more lightly: "she wants to talk to you."

The newspaper lowers again. Cole thinks for a moment that the ruse is too flimsy, that he sees right through it, but then 76 sighs and puts the paper aside.

Even the way he puts his boots on the ground and lifts himself up tells Cole that this is no ordinary soldier. He has energy to spare, a powerhouse in every sense of the word. His clothes are bulky and as cheap as Cole's own, but he can still see the crafted muscle underneath, the grace of a man half his age. But why would he hide it?

“Bit curious as to how you two even got in touch.”

Strangely, 76 grabs his duffel. “Heard about her nearly a year ago. Followed the trail here.”

“You know who she is? Who she used to be?”

“I sure do.”

His attitude is hard to parse. Easy, unaffected, but strangely devoid of real arrogance. The simple air of the endlessly self-assured, yet polite. It makes him even more suspicious.

As 76 nears, Cole can make out the small scratches on his mask, the abrasions on his clothes. The scar pulling downward from his forehead to the space in between his eyes. Whatever his story, the dude's been through a lot. That much is clear.

“How’d you find her? Everyone thought she was dead.”

“She found me.” He stops right in front of Cole, as if expecting him to move, slinging his duffel over his big shoulder. “Thought you didn’t have the inclination to ask questions, cowboy.”

“'Lotta people's lives changed after that woman disappeared. I’m just making sure nothing happens to her again.”

Then 76 walks around him with another low, humorless chuckle. “Not this time.”

Cole watches him walk out. He watches him cross the short path between this tomb and the next.

Once he sees him pass through the doorway, he brushes aside the newspaper and starts tossing through his things. He moves swiftly, and in a manner that cannot be easily traced, making sure to leave everything exactly how he found it.

But there’s nothing. Nothing but information about the Watchpoints, old data with no obvious meaning, and some personnel files for criminals active in Giza. *He took his bag because he expected me to go through his shit,* he realizes. There’ll be nothing here that could identify him.

Just when he's ready to give up and find another spot to sleep, he finds an old notebook under wrinkled manilla folders. Spiral-bound, dark red, simple plastic -- something he’d expect to see in a school boy’s backpack. Ready to fall apart at any moment.

He opens it up and flips through the dark, dense handwriting, but can hardly read a word. Only a few pages in does he realize that they’re poems, and only halfway through does he see one that’s to discern.

They built me to love you

Five pills for nine days, ten pills for twenty-three

Nine course blood per ten course venom

Of course we would disintegrate.

There are black hollows in the tree line, still

Empty spaces in the stream

Stones I left in the field so that

The next crop would grow around your name.

We listened to the same sermon seven states away

Then the same general, shoulder to shoulder

Baseball games I took you to, that you let me

You have your lists and I have mine.

I know that you prayed when the first God shut its eyes

we wound up pagans still.

Must be a sin to pray to fallen angels.

If Hell's where you're going then we'll take my truck.

My dad looking through seed catalogues

My mother fixing shirts

And you, in that house. A miracle

I will never live down.

Cole stares. A strange weight has settled on his shoulders, on his boots -- on the crown of his head, as if the sky were pushing down. There's a similar downward sensation in his gut, mimicking the grainy eddies he can hear between the ancient edifices outside. He's never had an eye for art nor a mind for poetry. But as he closes it up and puts it carefully where it was, he feels something deeply unsettling, like bad timing. Like a nostalgia for the future.

He practically jogs out of the tomb. He finds a corner of high walled stones that block the wind, rolls out his cot in a soft bit of sand. He tries to sleep for a long time, listening to the storm. Listening to the dull roar between his own ears.

Not for the first time, he wishes someone else laid beside him. Not Ana, not even really Hanzo -- some amalgamation of the two and whoever else he's known and loved and lost to circumstances both beyond and within his control. When he looks at the stars, he tries to wish for someone to blame, but just winds up wrapping Hanzo's golden sash around his hand and humming something like a prayer. *Just you and me again.*

Then he takes out one of the sleep darts he nicked from Ana's station, jabs it into his thigh, and passes out in an instant.

He dreams of a giant lonely sycamore with flowers at its feet, little fuzzy clusters whose name he likes -- *New Jersey Tea* . Pale as the tree's bark, pale as death. Wandering through a cornfield he's only ever imagined from other people's stories, whistling songs he's only heard from other people whistling. *Summertime. You are my sunshine* . He dreams of sitting beside a blue demon on a cliff, both watching the same yellow lighthouse, legs dangling over an abyss of stars. The laughter of their friends far behind their backs. Knowing without speaking that their spirit's best friend was at their shoulder and nowhere else.

And then, like all the times before, everything moves on without anyone asking Cole if that's what he wanted. The lighthouse falls into the sea. The fire on his serape grows like a flower out of a cliff face.

Not for the first time, he falls asleep with the sash beside his lips.

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The snow has turned to slush under Cole's boots as he and Hanzo are hauled towards a truck, wisps of flurries soothing their overheated skin. Cole half-slips just to piss off their captors, but it's about as effective as Hanzo's angry swearing. They're loaded up quickly, forced to their knees, and their cuffs are locked onto short chains on opposite ends of the truck's walls. Then the door slides shut and a few weak bars of light are all they have to make out one another's grim faces. The floor of the truck is cold hell under Cole's knees (they even took his knee-guard) and, when the engine growls to life and takes off, the vibration makes it twice as bad.

Out of the frying pan, into the freezer.

"Well," he drawls, trying to adjust his weight so his ass doesn't sink onto his spurs, "Doubt they'd go through all this trouble just to kill us as soon as we get to wherever we're going, so. That's something."

Hanzo looks at him and speaks lowly. "You have nothing on your arm that can help?"

"What, like a hidden hardlight disruptor? I ain't a Swiss Army knife, darlin."

Hanzo narrows his eyes. "Apologies. I did not intend --"

"Nah, it was a fine idea. But I'm afraid she's barely useful as substitute for an arm, let alone anything to remedy this bitch of a situation."

Hanzo drops his gaze, scanning the floor between them as if seriously considering ways in which to escape. Cole knows a thousand plans are probably whirling through his head. Something clever, something he once did a long time ago during his exile, maybe. He waits with widening eyes.

Surprised once again by Hanzo Shimada: "I once befriended a wolf."

Cole brow jerks up. "Say what?"

Hanzo looks up. Almost coy. "A wolf. Like a big coyote?"

Cole scoffs and laughs at the same time. "No way."

"Yes way." Hanzo looks like he's about to smirk, it's so close, but kept to his sharp and glinting eyes instead. Maintaining just enough of a poker face for Cole to be caught between the giddy sense that a joke is happening and the gentle awe of true belief. "In the forest of northern China."

He decides to believe him. "Heh. How about that. Didn't know China had wolves."

"They do. In the mountains." He looks off to the side, seeing the memory. "He came to my camp in the night. Took some of my hunt."

"You hunt?"

“When I must." The truck gives a horrific jolt, and both of them wince, but Hanzo continues with his chin up. "I learned as a boy.”

“Me, too. Or...” Cole also looks off to the side, seeing his memories. “Only went once. Rabbits in Grand Mesa. They were everywhere. Really wanted to try it, so Captain Amari took me. She taught me everything. Was kinda grim about it though -- took the bug right outta me. I saved a foot, though. For luck.” Cole’s eyes have glazed over, misted with memory. “Lost it somewhere in Galveston. Right after I left the 'watch.”

“You spoke of her often before. Ana Amari.”

Cole raises his brows. The cold rattle of the truck breaks back into his awareness all at once. “I did?”

Hanzo tilts his head. “Do you not remember?”

He leans back, feels something try to pull him out of the conversation, out of the space, back into the shaking truck and the impending danger beyond. He lowers his head and grinds his jaw -- ever the lone gunman. “This ain’t the time nor place, Shimada, we gotta --”

“Cassidy.”

His teeth click shut and he looks up. He's never heard that tone in Hanzo's voice before. “Yeah?”

“I want to apologize.”

Cole's jaw tries to clench again. “Huh?”

“I want to say… I was never repulsed by your... your cybernetics.”

He goes still. “Oh.”

“That night in the cave.” Hanzo looks up now, his gaze frowning, as always, yet totally clear. “I did think that you had been modified by Overwatch the same way they modified Genji. Not just that… I feared that you and Overwatch were lying to me from the start, that they convinced you to…” Hanzo looks off to the side, his throat closing up around his words, “‘Persuade’ me to join your group. That Genji was not truly interested in reconciliation at all, but wished to trap me. That you would attempt similar experiments on me, perhaps. I broke into your records, I read of your Blackwatch, of your geneticist’s experiments. Of the deal your commander gave you to ‘persuade’ you to join -- prison or servitude. It did not sit well with me. I thought that you hid your enhancements on purpose. I thought that it proved that you had lied about many other things since we met.”

Cole can feel the look of pure disbelief etched onto his face, but he can't do anything to change it.

Hanzo must see it, too, because he goes on, “I did not trust Genji’s forgiveness, and so doubted my entire reason for being there. He is… he used to be a considerable liar. By necessity, perhaps, but a liar all the same. I thought that he may have had ulterior motives and

so I waited to find out what they were. Even as I went along with his... clumsy attempts at reconciliation." Shifting on his knees, he lifts his eyes again. "When I left your side, I argued with him for hours and was still unconvinced. So I decided to leave."

For once, the gunslinger is at a total loss for words. There's just no responding to something like that, from someone like Hanzo. Even the apologies he delivers are too formal, too intense -- like he's taking out his own heart and offering it on the edge of a sword in a hall full of witnesses. Cole feels like there's something very specific he should say in response, but he skipped that day at school.

Hanzo lowers his eyes again, the way he always does, out of respect. "I apologize, truly."

"Yeah. I mean…" Cole clears his throat, nods, "Yeah, it… it ain't nothing." He hopes his face conveys what his mouth is currently unable to.

"It is not 'nothing.'" Hanzo lifts his eyes a bit, but doesn't yet meet Cole's gaze. "I wanted to tell you before, when I called you. I wanted to tell you that I owe you."

"It's alright, Hanzo."

Now Hanzo really looks at him, frustrated and adamant and Cole finally finds his words. He's still sure they're not right, but that look pulls them out regardless. "Or, at least… I ain't mad about it. And... you really saved my ass down there in the muck with those bullets. I expect you'll do me one or two more solids before this is through. If it's all the same, I'd rather not get into a game of debt with a *yakuza* lord." He tries out a crooked grin. "I aim to scratch your back more times than you can keep track of anyhow."

"And… as for Genji, I --"

"You don't gotta say nothing."

"But he --"

"We can talk it over later, if you want," Cole clears his throat again, as if he's forgotten how to use it, "But I ain't gonna hold it against you. Not in the way you're thinking, anyway. Maybe I didn't ever have a brother to kill, but I turned against the ones I had more times than I can count. I thought most of my sins were good ideas at the time. When I think about the things I done and why I did 'em... sometimes I don't know what I was thinking. The gang was my whole world. Can't imagine how much worse it was for y'all. Anyhow, I…" He shrugs, not wanting to get too deep into matters he still knows nothing about, matters too thorny and intricate to properly cover whilst handcuffed inside a dirty, freezing truck, "I've seen all kinds'a second chances. Seen my own life handed back to me when I thought I had to give it up for good. Seen people brought back through time and space. Even seen some come back from the dead." He grins at the floor between them, then picks his gaze up to meet Hanzo's eyes. "If you wanna start over, I'd be just fine with that. Got a shit memory anyway."

Hanzo keeps his eyes down, but Cole still stares at the points. There's so much going on behind those eyes: a different culture, a different language, a world apart from the highways

and mesas and slick government outfits the gunslinger has seen and left and reminisced about for years and years. Maybe one day he'll get to know some of it. Maybe one day he'll have the words to make Hanzo understand.

But, even now, Cole's never felt more like repeating that same old record: *we're not that different.*

Then the light suddenly changes from that silvery mid-day glare to a dusty brown-orange. The sun has dipped beyond the veil of pollution that has gathered since the Crisis, casting the entire city in a toxic haze.

Cole squints against the bars of light that drift up across his face and Hanzo, finally, looks up. He's a little fuzzy past the squint, but Cole thinks he can make out his expression.

He seems satisfied, if he had to give it a word.

"There is less light already."

"Sun sets fast in wintertime," Cole drawls, absent-minded. His eyes adjust, roam from the saturated black of Hanzo's hair to the dull reflection on the pewter earring through his right lobe. He looks so much like he did in the Western atmosphere of their Desert 04. Only this time, he doesn't look like he'd sooner put an arrow through Cole's skull than speak to him.

"Hn." Hanzo's tone has lowered, closer to a whisper, as if they're both winding down for the day. "The sun sets around five in Tokyo at this time of year."

"Always liked long nights." He can't disguise the warmth leaking into his voice. "Used to set around eight in Gibraltar."

Hanzo smirks, but only slightly. "Yes. Hardly enough time to get any good drinking in."

Cole's eyes drop, too -- to the noble column of Hanzo's throat, where the black thermal fabric stretches tight around its circumference. He sees the rapid beat of the archer's pulse through his tanned skin. He traces the cords of his throat up to his defined jaw, the sheen of gray he can still make out in the shaved hairs near his temple. That faraway look that seems so full of something Cole knows so well but can't put a name to. But maybe he doesn't need one.

"We managed."

He can hear the smile in Hanzo's voice as he meets his gaze. "That we did."

They only look into each other's eyes for a moment. Just a moment, but it's as if they haven't looked at each other once since reuniting in Numbani. Finally, Cole *sees* Hanzo -- past his dark circles, his pierced face, past the miles and the years and bad deeds of all kinds -- right through to the man who told him about dreams about lanterns and sat with him in a silence that is still eating at his soul.

And, if Hanzo's face is any indication, he sees him, too.

"Cole."

The gunslinger lets out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Has his name always sounded like that? Has anyone ever said his name like that before?

Hanzo leans first, but Cole comes swiftly after. Their chains jerk on their wrists and stop them both cold. They can't reach for whatever it was they'd respectively planned to do, but they still arch forward until their foreheads brush, connecting at the space just above and between their eyes. Just burning wrists and warm skin and the electricity that follows. Both men close their eyes and Cole takes a shuddering breath.

"Hanzo," he breathes out. Another breath, and then another, even lower, more rasping whisper: "goddamn it, Hanzo." He still doesn't know the right words but has abandoned the concept altogether. Now, he could be babbling in tongues and it'd feel just as good. "You're all under my goddamn skin."

And Hanzo doesn't answer, just gently tilts his forehead and lets out a low, hoarse sigh -- like an anvil falling, like something he's been holding onto for weeks, months, years. He shifts, seeming to almost nuzzle Cole, moving in the silent physical language of some wild pack animal, some lonely predator who howled and howled until it finally found someone who howled back. Cole moves with him, high up in their joint rapture, the smell of him like an epiphany. None of the soaps he'd used to block Gibraltar's red tide odor. Just Hanzo: here, whole, and brilliantly alive.

But when Hanzo opens his eyes and Cole traces the fantastic marbling of brown, like ancient stone worn away by eons of dripping water, he knows, too, that some walls still remain. Walls within Hanzo, walls within himself -- most of them self-imposed, but some of them necessary. Impulse worries at Cole like teeth on tender joints, riles all his natural disposition for addiction, for adrenaline; he wants to bite, to capture and gnaw. But there's more to this than the fire in his belly. Ana and Jack are riding inside this truck, too. And Overwatch. And the whole goddamn world.

When Hanzo leans back, Cole feels like he'll either lunge hard enough to break his own wrists or crumble into sand. He wonders, if they'd been able to reach, if Hanzo would've kissed him, but thinks he knows that he wouldn't. He doesn't know if he would've himself. Reality is filtering back into the truck as the light of sunset fades into another dark winter twilight.

Whatever is ripping away inside, the gunslinger still manages a wry half-grin. Hanzo even grins back -- subdued as always, but not stoic. Hard to pin down. As enigmatic as ever.

Some part of Cole would kill any number of men just to know what goes on behind those sleek eyes. Little sharp flints, like the obsidian arrowheads he used to find out in the desert. Weapons that maybe aren't aiming straight for his well-exposed heart.

He wants to believe. He wants to trust the impossible. It always seems like, the more improbably lucrative a prospect, the more Cole feels drawn to its light. Relationships, livelihoods, daredevil risks. Righteous pursuits. Milkshakes.

When they meet eyes again, Hanzo's tone has evened. All business once again. "The white limbs of those omnics."

It takes Cole another few seconds to fully come back down to earth. “What about ‘em?”

“They resembled a terrorist sect in parts of India that are known for attacking human settlements. They’ve become increasingly aggressive in recent years.”

“For real?” Cole narrows his eyes. “You think they’re connected?”

“I fought them in Mumbai. If they are not connected, their similarities make for a striking coincidence.”

Cole’s lips thin out as his jaw flexes. He knows he and Hanzo are thinking the same thing -- there’s not room enough in this tiny world for a coincidence like that.

Outside, the truck has pulled onto the bridge, and the shaking finally evens out.

“Don’t think they plan on doing us any real harm,” Cole mutters, jerking his head towards the driver.

Hanzo nods with a grunt. “That woman will take us to her superiors.”

“Yeah.”

“We must still be ready.”

“I hear you, pumpkin.” He rolls his shoulders, sits up a little straighter on his knees. Tries to prove that his ankle doesn’t hurt that bad. “Ready and willing. They might be doing us a favor, escorting us nice and safe like this into the city. We’ll thank them by sitting pretty for a spell. But, if those doors open and all Hell breaks loose -- you got a dragon on deck, right? Like Genji did?”

Hanzo chuckles, looking at him in a way that makes Cole warm all over.

“I have two.”

Chapter End Notes

RIP Hanzo's scatter arrows

Another film nod to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, which is one of the two Westerns that Hanzo and Genji watched in the first chapter! (the one Hanzo hated lmao)

[I did originally have more planned for this fic, but life got in the way, so I'm ending it here. I loved working on this story and I'm so, so grateful for all the support I received along the way. You've all been amazing! <3]

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